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CHATTO AND WINDUS, PICCADILLY, W.

THE
HANDS OF JUSTICE

BY

F. W. ROBINSON

AUTHOR OF
"GRANDMOTHER'S MONEY," "WOMEN ARE STRANGE," ETC.



IN THREE VOLUMES

VOL. II.

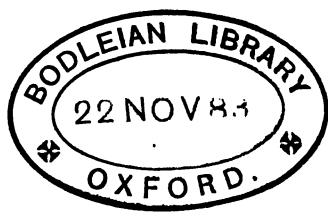
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FIVE YEARS AFTERWARDS.

CHAPTER III.

DOUBTING.

Lucy uttered a low cry, which was quickly suppressed, although the colour in her face did not return, and the long lashes quivered rapidly over the startled blue eyes. This had been one of the questions which she had prepared for, which she thought would in the hour of meeting be put to her, which she wondered had not been asked of her before by Hester Brake, and yet which had come at her like a stone from a sling.

“I have had so many thoughts and doubts,” she answered at last, “but not any that have seemed like truth to me.”

“You have some one in your mind who you think might have killed him?”

“No—not now.”

“You have had?”

“Yes,” she answered, with a shudder.

“Who was the first man whom you associated with this murder, Lucy?” was the eager question.

“Have you faith in first impressions?” asked Lucy.

“At times. I have found them carry out future truths,” she answered back. “On whom did your first suspicion rest?”

“John Woodhatch,” Lucy replied in a faint voice.

“You—you thought so!”

“Yes.”

“I could believe in others thinking so, not you,” she said. “He had no motive to take Morris’s life. Though he had been deceived in him, he loved him—he loved you!”

“You know, then——”

“What they say in Lincolnshire? Oh yes; very well,” she added scornfully.

“I knew I was very wrong, God help me,” said Lucy. “I did not know what I was doing when I associated that good man with so horrible a crime, and God forgive me for

adding to his trouble by any cruel doubts of him."

"They are all gone now?" was the inquiry.

"They are all gone," responded Lucy confidently.

"That is well," said Hester Brake. "We can scarcely look into his face, or listen to his honest voice, without believing him,—without believing in him implicitly," she said again, tracing some lines in the sand with her gloved hand.

Lucy glanced askance at her.

"You believe in him implicitly yourself?"

"I do," came the frank answer back. "What makes you think I doubt him?"

"I cannot say. Your manner, perhaps."

"He is my best friend—he was Morris's—he would have been yours and his," she continued.

"Yes, I know that."

"And Morris must have been killed by some one who hated him, or thought a grievous wrong had been done to him. A woman might have killed him. You, for instance."

“ I!—I kill my Morris, my poor, dear lost Morris ! ”

“ Women have killed men, have they not, and wives their husbands, before your time and mine ? To me, it has been all these years more like a woman’s act than a man’s ; more stealthy and subtle than a man’s would have been ; more completely in the dark, leaving no trace—a clever woman’s crime ! ”

“ My God ! ” murmured Lucy to herself, “ what a terrible thought to come to you ! ”

“ You might have had wrongs ; you might have found out that Morris was in the way ; you might have tired of him, or quickly detested him. You might— ” Here she stopped and looked at Lucy. “ But I did not guess you were a child like this. Forgive my want of charity, and let me think a moment more.”

She looked up suddenly, and said, “ I have said Morris was killed by some one who hated him, or thought a grievous wrong had been done. Your father, now,—would he have killed him, do you think, in a fit of passion,

discovering him with you that night, and believing Morris to be a villain ? ”

“ My father—my father, did you say ? ”

“ Yes ; I have suspected him too.”

“ My father ! ” repeated Lucy very slowly.

CHAPTER IV.

THE MASTER'S ORDERS.

LUCY BRAKE slowly recoiled with terror from the side of her companion. She sat back now with her two hands buried in the sand, which she was grasping nervously. This was a terrible woman who had come to Skegs Shore. Looking at her she forgot for an instant even that her child was away from her.

“ My father ! ” she said at last. “ Did I hear you aright ? You *did* say my father ! ”

“ Yes,” was the response ; “ I said your father.”

“ You must be very mad, madam, or you must have come here on purpose to insult me. Do you know my father ? ” she cried, with sudden impetuosity. “ Have you ever seen him in your life ? ”

“ I know your father. I have seen him many times.”

“And yet you think he might have killed my husband!” she exclaimed. “Oh! you must mean some one else, madam. You cannot imagine how good and just and holy a man he is,” she cried.

“A holy man!” answered Miss Brake; “that is an extravagant encomium, of which no man is deserving.. Why should I not suspect him? Tell him I do.”

“Why?”

“You suspected a better man in John Woodhatch,” she said; “a man who acts, not preaches.”

“I did him an injustice, and have acknowledged it,” replied Lucy.

“To him?”

“Yes—to him.”

“He will be grateful to you—poor John!” said Miss Brake. “It will be a little light upon his life.”

Lucy did not reply. The colour had flickered on her cheek for an instant, and then she had looked round for Morice in a frightened manner, and thought of nothing more till she had caught a glimpse of her again, leaping and laughing by the side of

Kitty Vanch, and evidently in high spirits with her new protector.

“I—I think I will leave you now,” she said.

“Before I have explained everything?” replied the other.

“Oh, madam—you have explained sufficiently!” said Lucy, her lips quivering with indignation. “You are here to set a daughter against her father; to sow, if it were by any possibility in your power—which it is not—the seeds of a terrible suspicion in her mind; and I will not listen further to you.”

“You judge too quickly,” said Miss Brake, very calmly now, regarding Lucy very intently, as a study which was as difficult for her to comprehend as her own character was difficult for Lucy to decipher; “you act too quickly. You and Morris were very much alike, and so, alas! were unsuited to each other. I have spoken out what was in my thoughts—why should I disguise it?”

“For the daughter’s sake you might have spared me,” said Lucy, rising to her feet.

“It was as well to show you that other people beside yourself have strange ideas as to how Morris Brake met his death, and that

ideas may vary as to his murderer. I may be as wrong as you are in my suspicions—possibly I am. I am a poor visionary at the best, but your dead husband rises before me like a ghost, and warns me."

"Horrible—horrible!" said Lucy, shivering; "let me get away from you. You have no right to wound me in this manner—and after all these years of silence to seek me out for such a cruel purpose."

"My poor headstrong girl, I have not sought you out for any purpose, and it is not really for your sake I am here. But being here," she added, "I thought I would like to see what kind of woman my brother had made his wife."

"You have seen me," said Lucy, still almost defiantly, "and now good day."

"Five years ago I did not visit this place," Miss Brake continued. "I did not know my brother was married till I read it in the newspapers, along with the news of his death—why should I have come to you now? You have expressed no wish to see me; and a cold letter from your father, saying and thinking nothing of *my* sorrow—which was identical

with your own, and may be a deeper sorrow now—was the only recognition of my poor existence. Before my strength was able to bring me here, Morris was buried—why should I seek out one who had helped to deceive me?"

"By marrying Morris, you mean?"

"Yes."

"It was a secret for a while between us," answered Lucy. "I am not called upon, I hope, at this late hour, to apologize for it to his sister."

"No. I do not require an apology, and I have not wished to know you," said Miss Brake. "I have felt myself your enemy rather than your friend."

"I can imagine so," replied Lucy.

"But an enemy who speaks out."

"Yes," said Lucy, with another shudder she was unable to repress; "you are terribly outspoken."

"But I could have told you more," was the slow comment here.

"Of my Morris—of my lost darling—you could!" exclaimed Lucy very eagerly again.

"Yes! a great deal more. Perhaps I may some day, when we are better friends."

"I can never be your friend, Miss Brake. I cannot believe yet you are Morris's sister," exclaimed Lucy.

"Very likely," was the reply. "I have been a woman with much to brood upon, like you, and have gone distraught, as women will under circumstances akin to yours and mine. Now, I am sane—and you, at least, I do not doubt."

"Why should you have suspected me?" asked Lucy wonderingly. "You said you had once a doubt of me—his wife."

"Ask me a few months hence, and I will tell you, if you have not guessed it for yourself by that time," she replied.

"I can see you no more," cried the young woman, as she began to move away from her. "You sent for me to crush me utterly."

"I am here against my will; I did not wish to come."

"What brings you to Skegs Shore, then?" asked Lucy, pausing again.

"My orders. The master wished it."

"Who is the master?"

"This man approaching, and for whom I have been waiting. I think you know him, Lucy Brake," she said.

Lucy looked in the direction which her sister-in-law had indicated, and coming towards them with quick strides across the sands, like a man in hot haste to greet a friend or confute an adversary, was the master of Farm Forlorn.

“ His orders ! ” exclaimed Lucy.

CHAPTER V.

JOHN WOODHATCH'S EXPLANATIONS.

JOHN WOODHATCH had now reached the ladies, and raised his hat to them. He shook hands with them immediately afterwards, regarding Lucy with evident surprise, and with his old grave interest.

“ I did not expect to find you here, Lucy,” he said. “ You have met at last, then, you two.”

“ Yes, we have met and exchanged confidences,” said Hester Brake quietly; “ and at present, John, we dislike each other very much.”

John Woodhatch smiled.

“ Oh! you will get over that,” he said. “ You should have known each other years ago—five years ago,” he added, as a shade passed over his face; “ but there, you have

met, and made your little niece's acquaintance too, Miss Brake."

"Yes."

John Woodhatch turned to Lucy again.

"I met Morice with Miss Vanch," he remarked. "They are very good friends already."

"I am going to fetch Morice," said Lucy.

"I will come with you part of the way if you will allow me," said the farmer. "I shall not be long, Miss Brake," he added.

"I am in no hurry," replied the elder woman.

"I am taking you away," said the younger one; "this is an appointment."

John Woodhatch did not answer, but when Lucy moved in the direction of Kitty and her child—who were advancing in the distance—he walked on by her side, with his hands behind him and his ebony cane clutched tightly in them, as we saw him first, one August day, looking at the reformatory from which he had taken Master Dorward. Five years had made no perceptible difference in John Woodhatch, save perhaps to add a few more grey hairs to his head; he was the same

stalwart, bronzed, earnest-looking man at forty-five as he had been at forty, and his step was as free and firm as that of men twenty years his junior. There might have been a shade more depth of gravity in the expression on his face that morning, but it was natural enough, considering many things. It had not been holiday ground which he had traversed during the last five years, though he had borne the burden and heat of the day without flinching at his task.

“I wish to speak to you for a few moments, Lucy, now that you have met Morris's sister,” he said. “You do not mind my walking with you for a little while—I shall not be in the way too much?”

“Oh no. I am always glad to see you.”

“Thank you,” he answered humbly; “it is kind to say so. And now—you do not like Hester Brake?”

“I cannot bear her,” was the frank answer back.

“You will like her in time.”

“Never—I am sure.”

“*He* liked her very much, and was a kind brother to her generally.”

“Yes,” answered Lucy pensively; “he was kind to everybody.”

“And,” he added, “she is certainly a good woman. Will you take my word for that?”

“I will try and take it—presently. Oh, John,” she exclaimed, “what do you think she told me?”

“I can guess—don’t repeat it, Lucy. It will only distress you.”

“How can you guess?” she asked curiously.

“She is a woman of wild theories as to the motive for her brother’s death, and she has told you some of them. Let them rest, Lucy,” he added earnestly, “for your sake. If you will—for mine.”

“Very well,” assented Lucy; “but you, knowing what she thinks of me, and of my father, must not ask me to like Hester Brake.”

“I am going to ask you to live with her—that’s all.”

“John Woodhatch, you must be as mad as she is!” exclaimed Lucy very quickly and with considerable warmth. “Live with that ungenerous woman? It would be easier for me to die.”

“You are allied by marriage—she is your

husband's sister. It is more than likely there will be property falling to your share and hers," he continued, gravely summing up the position ; " and she will be alone and want a friend."

Lucy regarded him with grave astonishment.

"Property!"

"Yes, I think so," he replied ; " but of that she will speak to you herself. You will have many opportunities for discussion on the subject."

"Not with her," said Lucy, shivering. "I have told her I will see her no more."

"How can you help it?" asked John Woodhatch. "She has made up her mind to live at Skegs Shore."

"To live here?"

"Yes. She has disposed of her house at Boston."

"To live at Skegs Shore?" Lucy repeated. "At your commands, then, John—not of her own free will ; I am very sure of that."

John Woodhatch looked surprised in his turn, as he gazed down earnestly at the young face flushed with animation — bright with anger and very fair to see. The troubles of

five years had not dimmed the remarkable beauty of his companion, rather had added a new charm of thoughtfulness to her, and at two and twenty years of age she was a fairer woman than when Morris Brake had married her.

“Why do you say at my commands?” he asked. “Has it ever appeared to you that my wishes were considered law by any one? Have you not seen, with the rest of them, how every hope of mine drops from the tree, a withered leaf at best?”

Lucy looked down, then said in a lower voice, “She told me she was here against her will, and by the master’s orders.”

“Am I—the master?”

“Yes; she says as much as that.”

He walked on a few paces more in silence, as if considering deeply the motive of the avowal and in what way it affected him; then he said, “I am no more her master than I am master of myself.”

“Have you not asked her to come, John?” said Lucy. “Pardon me, old friend, if I am pertinacious, perhaps suspicious; but she said at your orders she was here.”

“She may call them orders, if it pleases

her," he answered. "It was necessary she should come for a while, and I said so."

"Ah! you speak like her, in riddles," cried Lucy; "you are not as frank and open with me as you used to be."

"There, you are angry," he said, smiling now, "and I am an aggravating fellow in your estimation. And yet I have forced myself upon your company to tell you, first of all, a secret."

"Connected with the coming of that woman?"

"Connected with the coming of Hester Brake, and her companion——"

"Miss Vanch?"

"Yes."

"Well—what is it, John?" she inquired. "You see I have all my woman's curiosity left still."

"Yes—or you would not be a woman," he added dryly.

"And the secret?"

"Which you will keep, of course?"

"Yes—I promise. There."

"Miss Vanch has come to Skegs Shore to be married."

“Indeed.”

“She is engaged to a friend of yours.”

“Who can it be ? ” said Lucy wonderingly.

“One whom you have often said has grown out of all knowledge of his past, and is my model pupil, a credit to my teaching, and my influence over him, and so forth,” he said, speaking very hurriedly.

“Mr. Dorward—Greg ! ” was the exclamation here ; and Lucy’s eyes grew rounder and larger with astonishment.

“Yes ; Gregory Dorward,” he replied. “I thought I should surprise you.”

“Gregory—Dorward. Yes,” she said, drawing one long deep breath before becoming like herself ; “I am surprised indeed. How long have they known each other ? ”

“Oh ! I don’t know exactly. They have been engaged twelve months, at all events,” replied John Woodhatch ; “long enough to wait for each other, and not to get tired of each other.”

“They are very young to marry——”. And then Lucy remembered her own early dash at matrimony, and was discreetly silent as to that part of the argument.

"If they know their own minds, and have made up their minds, I don't think youth is very much to do with it—rather an advantage than otherwise, I suppose," he added, like a man who had outlived youth so completely, that he did not understand now its hopes and fears, its dreams and realities, its ambitions and its disappointments, its bright outlook over the land of love and faith and happiness.

"I only glanced at Miss Vanch once or twice," said Lucy, "but I should not have thought—I should scarcely have thought," she said, correcting herself a little, "that she was quite suitable for Gregory."

"Why not?"

"She is older, is she not?"

"By a month or two, not more."

"Both twenty-one?"

"That is about it, I should say," replied John Woodhatch.

"I should have thought," she said again, "that Greg might have done better than marry Miss Brake's maid, companion, or whatever she may call herself; he is so clever in his way, so shrewd and observant and quick—even so gentlemanly, I might say. He seems

about the last man to be in a hurry to take a wife. Ah! you don't like my criticism—you are frowning at it."

"Am I?" he said with a quick laugh. "That is because I am of a different opinion; and I don't like my opinions disturbed by other folk. The old failing of mine—an insufferable conceit, child. Don't mind it."

"Besides—"

"Here, we will not discuss the question any further," he said, interrupting her. "If they love each other, what is the use of argument? And what will they care for our comments upon the case?"

"It is a true love story, then," said the young widow; "quite a romance—and," she added, with a sigh, "ending happily, as romances should. Why, you are frowning again!"

"I was wondering at the end of it a little. Who can say what it shall be?"

"Don't you believe in the strength of their affection, or in its endurance?" she asked, looking hard at the master of Farm Forlorn.

"You shall see what true love is for yourself, Lucy. Here is Kate Vanch and little Morice."

CHAPTER VI.

KITTY'S ENGAGEMENT.

KATE VANCH and Lucy's child were very close upon them now, and Morice, catching sight of her mother, and having had for the time enough of her new friend, let go Kitty's hand and ran towards her.

"Mamma, mamma, what a time they have kept you away!" she cried, with all the ingratitude of her sex.

"She was beginning to fret for you," explained Kate. "I am glad you have come half-way to meet us, Mrs. Brake."

"She is nervous, like her mother, I am afraid. It is my one fear," she said to John Woodhatch, by way of explanation.

"Don't fear anything," he answered gruffly; "she is a brave, strong child enough. You should let her come to Farm Forlorn for a

few weeks, Lucy. Eh, Morice—how will that do?"

"Oh yes, yes—I should like to," cried the child.

"No, no—I couldn't part with her," said the mother.

"Come with her, and bring your father too, as in the old days."

"Presently—presently," she replied with a faint smile, "when I have the courage again; for I want to see the farm very much. It was a dear home to me once—when Morris was alive."

"Ah! yes—exactly. Kitty," said John Woodhatch, very quickly now, "I have taken the liberty of telling Mrs. Brake of your engagement to our friend Greg. You will not object to my forestalling you with this important news?"

She smiled and shook her head, whilst the colour mounted rapidly into her face.

"Is it so great a secret?" she asked.

"Mrs. Brake did not know of it until this moment."

"Indeed," answered Kitty.

She looked askance at Mrs. Brake, as if in

doubt how the news might have affected the young widow, and wondered very much at the intentness of her gaze. It was a steady, searching gaze, which even embarrassed Kitty a little, and she turned from her to John Woodhatch with a quick, appealing look.

"I have told her the engagement is about a year old, and that you love each other very much," said Woodhatch, as if in answer to her glance or in explanation—or as if, Lucy thought suspiciously again, to put her on her guard. "That is right, I hope?"

"I hope so, sir—I hope so," was the rapid answer.

"Gregory has kept his engagement very much of a secret from us all," said Lucy.

"That is very natural," responded Kitty Vanch. "I have not mentioned it to any one, except Mrs. Brake. I—I think it was understood it was to be a secret for a while, Mr. Woodhatch. Was it not?"

She looked at John Woodhatch as if she were in doubt herself, but open to correction.

"Yes. We did not want all Skegs Shore to talk of this before its time," John answered.

Lucy could say nothing against keeping an

engagement secret; but there was still an air of doubt, almost of bewilderment, upon her face which John Woodhatch could not account for, and which perplexed him in his turn.

“And when is the happy event to come off, Miss Vanch?” asked Lucy after an awkward pause.

“In a few weeks,” John Woodhatch answered for her.

“So soon!”

“And you will not be sorry, I suppose?” asked Woodhatch.

“Sorry!” exclaimed Kitty frankly. “Oh no.”

“You love Greg very much. You have not repented of saying yes to his proposals,” Woodhatch said jestingly. But it was heavy and unnatural jesting, Lucy thought.

“God knows I shall be very, very happy,” was the fearless answer; “and I hope He will give me power to make him very happy too.”

“You love him so deeply, then?” inquired Lucy.

“With all my heart. I would die for him

if he asked me. Is that love deep enough, madam?" she answered almost passionately. "Is that how you ladies-born love your sweethearts, I wonder?"

Yes, Lucy Brake had no longer any doubt in her mind of the depth of Kitty Vanch's affection, which startled her by its fervour, its frankness. It was a face strangely mobile, and swayed by every varying emotion, into which Lucy looked. She was amazed at the animation which coloured it, brightened and gave life to it, at the shadow which passed across it again, and then was followed by new light and hope. An extraordinary young woman this, excitable and impulsive, but evidently fond of Gregory Dorward.

"Well, I hope you and Gregory will be very happy together," said Lucy. "You have my best wishes. And may your love and happiness last longer than mine did, is all the harm I wish you both."

"Thank you, Mrs. Brake. I will tell Greg that, if I may?" she said.

"Yes—tell him that," murmured Lucy Brake; then she extended her hand to Kitty, wished her good morning, shook hands with

John Woodhatch, wished him good morning also, and went upon her way.

Lucy Brake walked homewards very rapidly, and the look of perplexity upon her face did not die away as she proceeded. Kitty Vanch's straightforward and unflinching explanation of the state of her feelings had convinced her of the young woman's affection; but it was none the less impressed upon her that Kitty was hardly fit for Greg—that there was an unsuitability about the match impossible to explain, and yet remarkably evident to the widow. Who was this Kitty Vanch? Where had she come from to rise up like a ghost in this way and to be companion, even friend, of the bitter-tongued woman whom she had left upon the sands? Were there new mysteries cropping up around her at Skegs Shore? and in the strange folk whom she was meeting on her path in life, were there to follow now strange actions and conceits, perhaps terrible mistakes?

She walked on rapidly, with Morice trotting by her side, and asking a hundred questions, to which the young mother did not reply by scarcely a single word. There was one grim

fact before her, she believed, and it was not easy to face or comprehend. Let her make haste home and think it over, and take her father into her confidence, if it were necessary; and she thought it might be necessary very soon.

What a deal she had to tell him! What a deal had happened since she had left him sitting in the sunshine that morning!

CHAPTER VII.

DISTURBED.

As Lucy Brake had left her sire, so she found him ; which was a fact which surprised her a little, the Reverend Alexander Larcom's every-day habits being methodical and business-like. As a rule, the Methodist parson was not a man to sit in the sun all the morning. He was energetic and bustling, partial to running about the village angling for proselytes, looking up the backsliders, encouraging the new converts by his presence and his patronage—altogether a man somewhat obtrusive and always energetic, and only taking his rest when the day's work was done, and there were crimson lights of sunset on the water-ways which drained the great fen-land. At such a time he would rest generally, in his shirt-sleeves, and with a long clay pipe in his

mouth, and think over his day's work, or his next Sunday's sermon ; but on this particular day he had not removed from the position in which Lucy had left him two hours before.

“ You have not been here all the time ? ” asked Lucy, as Morice ran to her grandfather, and clambered upon his knees.

“ Ay, but I have,” he answered, as his rugged features softened at the sight of the child, and were momentarily lit up by a smile.

“ You are not well,” cried Lucy, always quick to suspect disaster since the day of the great shock.

“ I am vary weel, Lucy,” was the reply ; “ but just a leetle sick o' wark this morning ; more deesposed for a good long think than looking up my slooggards over yonder,” and he pointed with the stem of his pipe towards the distant village.

“ I was afraid for a moment. This—this is so unlike your usual fashion,” said Lucy.

“ Farsheens change a great deal, Lucy—farsheens in manners as well as in dress,” he replied. “ Soometime I am deesposed to think we are never twice alike. The follies of one day becoom the habits of the next ; the

vartues of yesterday look, in the light of to-morrow, like arbstinacy or sin ; the wise man of a week ago becooms the fool of to-day ; the knave we shun now in the street was the harest man to whose praises we sang last year. That's aboot it, little Morice," he said suddenly, addressing his granddaughter ; " but ye'll not oonderstand me yet aweel."

Lucy was not accustomed to hear her father discourse at any length out of the pulpit, and never to hear him in this distrustful, dissatisfied manner. Something had surely happened to disturb him during her absence ; but she proceeded quietly to ascertain the cause. She went into the cottage and remained there till their little handmaiden had prepared the dinner, when she summoned him and Morice to their early meal.

At the dinner-table she said—

" Has any one called this morning ? "

" John Woodhatch looked in. That is all," the father answered.

" Indeed. How strange ! "

" I don't see anything vary remarkable in it meeself," he said satirically, " seeing he is naver within half a mile of us but he cooms

on. Not for my sake altogether; and if he had known ye had been away, it's more than posseeble he would have given me a wide berth this marning."

"He did not tell me he had seen you. That is why it appears strange to me," said his daughter, by way of explanation.

"Ye have met him?"

"Yes."

"Before ye had seen Miss Brake, or afterwards?"

"Afterwards."

"And he did not say we had had a leetle argument—a few words even—on an old soobject?"

"No, no. Oh, father, you have not quarrelled with your friend?" exclaimed Lucy in alarm.

"I was a leetle hot and deesputatious; so was he, being a most arbsteenate man; but we did not quarrel exactly. He made me wroth," said the father, "because he would not be conveened by sansible argument. That's like John Woodhatch, mark ye, Lucy; his own way, whether right or wrang. That's John."

“What did you argue about?” asked Lucy.

“Ye’ll know in time. As John did not mention to ye that he had seen me this marning, perhaps the less we talk aboot it the better,” he said.

“Was it anything concerning me, I wonder?”

“No, it was not,” he answered very shortly.

“Was it——”

“Lucy, do ye think I’m going to sit here to be crass-exameened by my own child,” he cried, angrily now. “I tell ye I have never put up wi’ that, and I never will. Never!” and thump came the handle of the knife on the table, making plates and glasses dance and jingle, and bringing tears from Morice.

Lucy soothed her child with a few words and caresses, and then said—

“I was not cross-examining you, father; I was only curious to learn what had disturbed and depressed you.”

“I am not dapressed.”

“And I shall learn in time. You or John will tell me,” she added.

“It’s not much of a sacret, but I must keep it till John speaks of it himself,” said the

father. "Ye and I never had parfect confeedence between us—always something which has set us a bit apart—father and child as we are."

"Oh, father," cried Lucy, "you are thinking of five years ago. Is that right, or fair to me?"

"Wa'al, wa'al, no," he answered quietly. "Don't mind me, Lucy, any more. That confoonded John has upset me altogather. I'm not quite meeself. There! I own it, girl; and there's an end of the matter."

"And you have not quarrelled with Mr. Woodhatch?"

"Blass my soul, no. It's not the first starmy heap of words I have had with the most peeg-headed and conceited— Wa'al, did ye see Miss Brake?" he asked suddenly and irrelevantly.

"Yes."

"And foond her an angular, three-carnered kind of a woman, too. I can tell that by your dooncast looks, Lucy. Wa'al, what did she say?"

"Everything that was hard and cruel and suspicious," answered Lucy. "She is a terrible woman."

“John Woodhatch does not say so,” replied the Methodist. “I don’t say so meeself.”

“She tells me you have seen her very often.”

“Yes, when she lived away from Boston,” was the answer. “A seengular creature, spoiled a little, and soored a great deal by past trooble and a lifelong illness; but one of the few good women in the world for all that, I am deesposed to believe, Lucy. Did she give ye any massage for me?”

Lucy started. She had been enjoined to give one—a terrible and cruel message—but she had had grave doubts of delivering it. She hesitated very naturally, but the hesitation was fatal. Alexander Larcom’s shrewd perceptions had seen at once that there was something being kept from him again.

“Give it me axactly—in the very same wards, please, Lucy; it is more easily understood,” he said almost sternly.

“She spoke in the heat of passion,” remarked Lucy. “She could not think—could not mean what she said.”

“Oh! ye have been having a few wards too, then,” said Mr. Larcom dryly. “Ye can’t sit

still and be pelted with hard wards any more than your father, and for the reason ye are your own father's child, for that matter. Wa'al, what did she say ? ”

Morice had slid down from her chair by the mother's side and was busy with her doll in the corner of the room ; but Lucy looked timidly towards her as if it were not well or safe to speak of the dark past before even so young a child.

“ She is mad, I think. My poor husband's death may have turned her brain, and given her the wildest suspicions,” suggested Lucy.

“ Ye spoke, then—of your hoosband ? ”

“ Yes.”

“ What did ye say ? ”

“ I told her that in my first despair and grief I thought John Woodhatch might have killed him,” she said in a low whisper, “ and she was angry with me.”

“ Vary naturally,” replied the father. “ She fights his battles, as well she may. A better freend than John—a stancher freend, if not deceived in any way, as Morris and Fladge deceived him—a truer heart, a more ganerous, warm-souled, arbstinate deevil of a man, does

not exeeest in or out of Lincolnshire. But go on, Lucy ; ye deevarge, child—ye deevarge so confoondedly that I don't know what I'm saying. What is her massage to me ? ”

“ That she suspects you,” cried Lucy.

Mr. Larcom sat back from the table with his eyes glaring at Lucy, and his big-veined hands clenched into fists upon the table.

“ She soospects ME—of the murder—of Morris ! ” he exclaimed in little gasps at last.

“ Yes—she is even wicked enough for that.”

“ Did she say why ? ”

“ I will tell you all, father,” said Lucy. “ It is a bitter subject with me, but it is fair and right we should know who thinks ill or well of us.”

“ It puts us on our guard,” he answered slowly.

“ And we tell enemies from friends,” added Lucy.

“ Sametimes—not always,” came the slow response.

In a few words, spoken very hurriedly, as though the subject were too full of pain and horror to dwell upon at length, Lucy related the story of her strange meeting with Hester

Brake upon the sands at Skegs Shore, of all that the invalid had said, and all the daughter had replied in her indignation and defence.

Alexander Larcom was a bad listener, and inclined as a rule to break in with his own comments and hot replies to anything and everything which jarred upon his views of the subject in dispute; but he listened patiently to Lucy's recital, with the furrows in his face deepening as he listened. When Lucy had finished he was silent for a while, like a man whose pride has been utterly crushed, or whose astonishment was too deep for words.

"How leettle we know what our freends think of us, Lucy," he said at last, "or how awfully we may be meesjudged at any pariod of our career—meesjudging others in our turn, too, and God forgeeving us all, let us hope, for utter lack of weesdom!"

"She is a mad woman, father. Think no more of her suspicions."

"Ye don't—surely?" he inquired.

"I do not. Oh no, no. Is it likely?"

"Yes, she is vary mad," he said; "and I have always thought so wa'al of Hester Brake. The best of a bad family—the best of all of

them, Lucy. And her mind is turned at last, it seems. Poor Hester—poor woman!"

"Tell me of her family, and Morris's, father?" Lucy entreated. "How did you know her first?"

"Ah! ye must ask her, or John Wood-hatch, to tell ye that," he said. "It's—— Now, what is it, girl?" he cried to the small domestic, who entered at this moment. "Can't ye knock, instead of boonding in like a firework upon us? Ye'll never larn manners, till the crack of doom, I fancy."

"If you please, Mrs. Brake, Mr. Gregory Dorward wants particularly to see you," said the domestic by way of general reply.

"Mr. Dorward!" repeated Lucy to herself.

CHAPTER VIII.

A LAST APPEAL.

“ Ask Mr. Dorward to step in,” said Mr. Larcom to the servant ; but Lucy added very quickly—

“ No, I will go to him.”

“ Wa’al,” said the father dryly, “ if it’s any secret that ye wish to keep back from me—and ye were always fond of hiding away the truth from the father, Lucy—perhaps ye had better.”

“ There, you distrust me again,” cried Lucy ; “ you are always hard upon me, and when I least deserve it. Gregory Dorward may have something to tell me about Morris.”

“ Good Lard ! it’s noothing but Morris,” moaned the Methodist. “ It’s enough to toorn your brain, girl. Why, what aboot him ? ”

“ Greg is on the clue at last, I hope,” she

said, in a hasty whisper in his ear. " You know how quick he is, how far-seeing ; but he will say nothing before you, I am sure."

" Yes, a close coostomer," Mr. Larcom remarked. " Ye think too much of him, Lucy, surely."

" Do you not admire his character yourself, father ? " she asked. " Have you not often spoken of his rise in life, his cleverness ? Why, only a few weeks ago did you not allude to him in your sermon, as the young man who, with one fair chance offered him, had turned from evil to good ? "

" I was not thinking of Greg Dorward, child," answered Mr. Larcom. " I am not so parteeularly fand of him, shining light as he is in John Woodhatch's eyes. I don't dees-
-pute Greg's claver—that he isn't even over-
-claver for twanty-one years of age—that the
change in him is wanderful ; but still he's a
lad I don't take vary keenly to myself. And
perhaps it's as well ye see the young gentle-
-man in the garden, Lucy, especially as he's
on horseback," he added, after a glance
through the window, " and we can't ask him
to bring the animal into the parlour."

Lucy was surprised at this fatherly estimate of Greg Dorward's character—the new character produced at Skegs Shore—but she had not time to continue the discussion then. She passed into the garden, with a little sunbonnet set very carelessly and gracefully upon her head, and went quickly down the path to meet him.

And in the roadway, bestriding a restive black horse that was prancing and curveting very gracefully all over the road, and absolutely refusing to stand still on any pretence whatever, was Greg Dorward, the lad we saw last at Farm Forlorn—a fierce, untamed, dangerous specimen of juvenile depravity, fresh from a reformatory, and none the better for it; sent out a failure, labelled as incurable, and thought not worth the further study of honest, earnest men.

Could this be Greg Dorward, of Bolter's Rents, of the prison, of the reformatory, of the early days at Skegs Shore? Had five years worked so great a change in him that his own father and mother would not have known him, that Mr. Fretwell would have gasped in wonderment at, that even John Woodhatch,

proud of his own teaching and his theory, was inclined to think at times a something hardly pertaining to the active life about him?

It was a handsome young fellow on horseback, a casual observer would have thought at that distance. Greg was slightly above the middle height, of a well-made and lissom figure, the very picture of a dashing horseman who set off the thoroughbred he bestrode, as it assisted to set him off. When he leaped to the ground and came more closely there was a difference in him, and possibly to his disadvantage—though it was not so easy to point out where the difference lay.

Still it was a handsome face, but singularly, almost painfully resolute—a face that looked at life ahead unflinchingly, as a soldier might look charging onwards, regardless of the enemies before him, or of the death from the cannon's mouth which awaited him; as a strong man might look brought to bay and still defiant; as Ajax might have looked, as Napoleon. It seemed the face of a man determined to thrust his way in the world; who had made up his mind, early in life, to move to a given point—whether for good

or evil, who could tell?—and was still proceeding persistently towards it, at all risks and over every obstacle, with his ears closed to the warnings, the vituperations, the wise counsel, the foolish suggestions, the ever-noisy babble of the crowd through which he clave his way. There seemed even something of John Woodhatch's steady, grave looks in the young man, as if living with the master, constant association with him, earnest application to all that he had taught, complete submission to his training—as the training agreed with him and his own projects for advancement—had set a mark upon him which, at a distance again, reminded one of John Woodhatch, and might have led a few folk to imagine that this was John Woodhatch's son.

Standing at arm's length, Greg Dorward's looks would have scarcely pleased every one; they were not perfect, at times they were repellent, the firmness of expression looked like obstinacy—like John Woodhatch's obstinacy, even!—the forehead, though broad, was far too low to please all tastes, and the keen dark eyes had a furtive cast in them at

times which was not pleasant to confront, and which reminded the master of Farm Forlorn of the day when the boy emerged from his solitary cell dazzled at the light, but un-subdued and dangerous. Well, this was an occasional expression only, and John Wood-hatch thought his favourite was growing out of it by degrees, though it would never wholly leave him in excited moments. Still Greg was a striking example of the master's training, and John was very proud of him. Here was one grand success at last in this clever, faithful, earnest, resolute Greg Dorward. Greg added no particular degree of lightness and sweetness to the life at Farm Forlorn ; if he were graver and more silent than his years warranted, if at times he were disposed to shut himself in his room night after night, and study and wrestle with the books with which John Wood-hatch had amply provided him, if he studied the colour from his face, and took deep dark circles underneath his eyes in consequence, that was all sure evidence of progress, and life was not a laughing matter with this strange young fellow. The shadows of the terrible streets in which he had been taught to beg

and steal would surely fall athwart him in his new career, and there would be, despite his self-will, no wholly passing from them into the bright, open land where lives less chequered than his own could exist, and laugh, and be happy in their very ignorance of evil. They talked of Greg's cleverness at Skegs Shore, in the market towns beyond, in the city of Lincoln itself, and wherever Greg went upon his master's business; there was something almost akin to genius in the readiness with which he seized upon the salient points of a bargain or a contract; and his knowledge of horses, his accuracy of judgment respecting them, and his skill as a rider reminded long-memoried folk of Morris Brake, who had also profited vastly by the master's teaching before he had been hustled out of life.

And it was this young, strong, decisive-looking fellow who, with his horse's bridle over his arm, advanced towards Lucy Brake, raised his felt hat in gentlemanly fashion, and bowed courteously over the hand which had been extended to meet his own—just in the faintest degree unwillingly, his acute perceptions told him.

“Ah! you are offended with me, Mrs. Brake,” he said in quick sharp tones that might have reminded one again of Mr. Woodhatch, as though he had caught the “trick of it” by association also; “you have already judged me before I have had time to say a word in my defence.”

“Oh no, I am not offended,” Lucy Brake hastened to say, and with a heightened colour. “What have I to take offence at? What has your life to do with mine in any way, Greg, save that you have my best wishes for its prosperity?”

“You sent me your best wishes this morning,” he replied.

“Yes.”

“By Kitty Vanch? So Mr. Woodhatch told me.”

“Yes; by Miss Vanch,” Lucy repeated, “whom I saw for the first time this morning, and heard for the first time that you were engaged to marry.”

“I will explain,” he answered; “I have ridden over to explain.”

“I have no right to any explanation,” she said, “and I do not require any.”

“Pardon me, but you do.”

“No—no.”

“I asked you a few weeks back,” he said earnestly, “if you could let me look forward—in two years hence, and not in wilful haste—to becoming your lover, your husband; and I thought that being two years your junior would not detract from my chance of happiness, the suitor being terribly older than his years, as you know—as God knows.”

“Yes; but I told you then, Greg,” she said, recoiling a step at his vehemence, “that I could never love anything but my poor husband’s memory, and I bade you forget me, and think no more of one so unfitted to you in every way, as I am.”

“I know what you said, Lucy; I remember every word,” he said; “I am not likely to forget anything that has been told me by you. I accepted my dismissal. I knew it was final, and the end of one folly, perhaps my last folly, had come;—so much the better for me and my future, I thought, that it has come so early. But still an explanation is due to you, lest you should think me an utter scoundrel.”

"I do not think so, Greg, you know," she responded.

"Thank you. I am glad you do me justice," he replied.

"Still I do not understand your engagement, or why you should have come to me talking like a man free to marry whom he chose," said Lucy thoughtfully.

"Lucy," he said, "I thought I was free. I did not dream this marriage would be insisted upon by Mr. Woodhatch, or that he had made up his mind to it years ago."

"Indeed!" said Lucy. "Then Kate Vanch——" He continued as she paused—

"Is from the same past. John Woodhatch saved us both—saved us, as he says now, for each other; meaning well by us, but forgetting how lives change and hearts are inoved. At times," he added, with a momentary frown, "he forgets everything but his own plans."

"Why should he wish you to marry Miss Vanch?" asked Lucy. "What particular interest is it to him?"

"It is his idea of right," answered Greg; "a poetic fancy," he added, almost with a

sneer. "Our lives were one as boy and girl ; we were always together ; we starved and stole together ; we were cruelly ill treated together ; and we plotted together against those who ill treated us. As boy and girl we loved each other desperately, and hated everybody else. We fought and schemed and lied for each other always ; it was only our being suddenly cast adrift when children that saved us from the devil. Forgive me if I am too bold in my explanation, Lucy ; but I would have you know the truth of it, at any cost to me. There is the miserable history of it all."

"And now ?" said Lucy.

"And now this strange, awful, good man—I own his goodness, freely, for he has made my life what it is, and I am grateful to him—faces us at last with his command, as though we had no wishes of our own. And, by Heaven," he exclaimed passionately, "it seems as if we had not, struggle as we may. This must be, he insists ; 'it is what I have been striving for, what I bring you two together for again, what was in my mind when I set you both apart, and carried you, Greg

Dorward, to my farm at Skegs Shore. It is justice,' he says."

"It is a wild romance—the romance of crime, I fear," said Lucy, with a shiver. "I wish you had not told me; I do not understand it entirely."

"Your life has been too far away from evil to understand it, Lucy; and you know what mine has been," he answered very gravely.

Had I not seen you, day after day, for years, and been always drawn towards you, I should not have felt this chain upon me; perhaps have been glad it had ended thus, and thought, with Mr. Woodhatch, it was as well. But now," he cried; "but now!"

"When did you meet this—this lady again?" asked Lucy, still a little curious.

"I have not met her yet."

"Not met her!"

"I shall see her for the first time for five years to-morrow."

"To-morrow," repeated Lucy.

"Yes. I heard only this morning it was resolved upon," Greg continued. "Mr. Woodhatch had looked forward to my great delight at the news, and I was only amazed, crushed, and helpless."

“ Why helpless ? ”

“ He would turn me away like Fladge, if I said it should not be,” he replied. “ You know how relentless he is when the mood is on him.”

“ But you would not sink like poor Fladge, Greg,” she said.

“ I do not know how far I should sink,” was the moody answer; “ it is so easy to go down ! ”

“ And you, with your energy, talk like a girl,” said the wondering Lucy. “ Why, it is not like you ! ”

“ Tell me to defy him, Lucy,” he answered, looking steadily into her face, “ and I will do it. Without you I must sink to any meanness, to any sacrifice of honour even, to keep my place in his regard. There, I tell you everything ; I have no secrets from you. Save me if you will ; give me one hope, Lucy, and I will be happy in going away from here. But without you, sink I must ! ”

Lucy went back a step or two from him in alarm ; the passion in his nature did not stir her own, only set him further from her. She was afraid of him : in her heart

she had been ever afraid of him—possibly distrustful.

“I can give you no hope of my loving you, Greg. I am as sure of never marrying again as I am standing here,” she said. “My heart is in the grave with my dead Morris.”

“And that is final?”

“That is final,” she repeated.

“Then I shall go back,” he said, as his lips compressed and turned white, “and say, ‘Master, I am the slave you thought me. I will marry Kitty Vanch at your bidding.’”

“It may be best for you and her,” said Lucy.

“He thinks so; *he* should know,” was the bitter answer.

“You have not yet consented to this arrangement?”

“No.”

“She loves you, I believe, very truly. She is outspoken and honest; she——”

“Yes, yes, I know what she is. You are right, perhaps; but it does not give me any consolation. That I cannot bear from you,” he cried.

“Very well,” she answered.

He seized her hand and kissed it suddenly ; then he turned and sprang into the saddle, and the instant afterwards was galloping furiously along the country road, lashing his horse into a greater fury still as the distance grew between them both. Lucy was still looking after him—still wondering, perhaps, at the mystery about him, and of John Woodhatch's plans for other lives, and silent plotting for what he thought, in his poor finite intelligence, was good for them—when Mr. Larcom came slowly from the house to her side.

“ Ye have got rid of him at last, Lucy,” he said.

“ Yes, he has gone.”

“ He seemed in an odd, tear-away humour. Did he tell ye he was going to be married to Miss Brake's campanion ? ”

“ You know, then ! ” said Lucy, turning round.

“ I knew it was in John Woodhatch's mind five years ago, and I told him it was a vary foolish fancy. And,” he added, “ we almost quarrelled aboot it again this marning.”

“ It was that subject upon which you had words ? ”

“ Preceesely so.”

“ Poor Greg ! ” said Lucy ; “ it seems hard upon him, so far as I can make it out. But I see only through the mists.”

“ ‘ Poor Greg,’ did ye say, Lucy ? ” asked the father.

“ Yes. Why not ? ”

“ I should rather say, poor Kitty,” answered Mr. Larcom.

CHAPTER IX.

UNDER THE ELMS.

GREG DOWARD rode home, baffled and disappointed, but he was a young man who could conceal his disappointment very well—even with an enviable art—when the occasion was absolutely necessary. As it might be in this case; for when Lucy Brake and her father had done looking after him along the long, straight line of dusty road, when he had rattled madly through the village, and passed the railway station, and was fairly on his way to Farm Forlorn, he reined in his horse, and proceeded quietly and placidly along, patting the neck of his steed, as if by way of apology for the pace at which he had previously urged it.

Still his face was grave enough for half a dozen ordinarily grave faces, as though the

life ahead of him was not pleasant to confront, or easy to decipher; but the passion which had almost mastered him before Lucy Brake had died out very completely. He was a fair master of himself, it was evident; for as he neared the farm and the cluster of cottages about it, and in which the farm-labourers lived and thrived, and blessed John Woodhatch for his liberal wages, he was ready to exchange nods and smiles with all whom he met upon his way, and to answer readily and cheerfully enough to the salutations which were bestowed upon him. Still he was going to his fate, he thought; he did not see, clear-sighted as he might be in ordinary matters, how to escape it; he was not even certain that he cared to escape, now Lucy Brake had spoken her mind out freely to him, and told him his pursuit of her was hopeless. As he had imagined from the first, for that matter, though he had hoped against hope, and trusted in women's fickleness of purpose, and their inclination to act strangely and inconsistently, as a hard and sceptical man might have done, distrusting women generally, and setting them down as poor, weak things, with no will of

their own when stronger minds were ready to exert an influence over them.

But what were the thoughts of this new Greg Dorward, and how he has so completely stepped away from the sullen, discontented lad we left in our last book, will require some explanation in the course of future pages, if they tell not the story for itself. As he rode in through the farmhouse gates, which were opened for him by ready hands, into the big stable-yard on the right of the farm, he found John Woodhatch inspecting a contemplated purchase in young cart-horses, and very busy and critical. He glanced up as Greg rode into the yard, and nodded at him pleasantly.

“We have been waiting for you, Greg,” he said; “we want your opinion about this chestnut.”

Greg dismounted, and immediately dashed into business with remarkable briskness, whilst a sharp-visaged man, who had brought the animals all the way from Lincoln by easy stages, to the order of John Woodhatch, and subject to his final approval, stood by and watched him. One ignorant of his secret could not have possibly conjectured that this

quick, sharp-eyed young fellow, of horsey talk and general horsey knowledge, was the same being who had, in almost flowery language, that very afternoon made a last despairing effort to win the affections of Lucy Brake. This was another individual altogether—shrewd, observant, and not to be outwitted by a Lincolnshire horse-dealer, for all his youthful years.

“Well,” said John Woodhatch at last, “what is the verdict, Greg? Is it worth eighty pounds?”

“It is not worth eighty shillings,” answered Greg.

“Just what I told him before you came in,” said Woodhatch. “And now, man, you may take the lot away.”

“The lot, Mr. Woodhatch!”

“Yes; I’ll not have one of them.”

“But the rest there is not a question about.”

“They are worth the money; but you will get it somewhere else,” said Woodhatch firmly, “not out of me. And tell your master the next time he attempts a swindle, it had better not be Skegs Shore way. We

have a habit of fair dealing here. Good day."

"But—but," spluttered the amazed subordinate, to whom Mr. Woodhatch did not answer another word.

"Come, Greg," said John; and the master and pupil walked from the stable-yard, through a wicket-gate, into the broad green meadows stretching beyond.

"The other horses were good," remarked Greg; "it's a pity to let them go."

"We will not talk of the horses any more."

"But we are short of them."

"Very likely; but the man's master would have deceived me. Let him take it as a lesson."

Yes, this was John Woodhatch to the life, thought Greg Dorward. Honest and generous and open-handed as the day, but resisting all double-dealing against himself, and showing but scant mercy to him who would deceive him. A firm man—firm as the rock!

They walked on side by side across the fields, silent for a while. Presently John Woodhatch said—

"Well, have you thought it over seriously?"

“Yes, sir, I have.”

“I should have prepared you for her coming a little sooner, perhaps,” said Woodhatch. “I have been told this morning by Lucy’s father that I have not acted in a right and proper way—Lucy’s father, who knows all this story, Greg. But there, I have given you time to judge for yourself, and if I am right or wrong tell me so at once,” he said.

“I am a poor judge of what is right or wrong,” was the answer.

“I dispute that, Greg,” he said quickly. “You have seen what is wrong in life, in human conduct, and have turned your back on it for good. Who can do more, or better, than that?”

“Thanks to you, Mr. Woodhatch.”

“To me a little—to your God, a great deal,” was the ready answer. “Well—what is it to be?”

“I will marry Kitty Vanch when you wish.”

“Then I am very glad,” exclaimed the farmer. “I am really and truly glad, Greg, for both your sakes. I am sure it is for the best. I am certain of it. This will be a very happy match.”

“ I hope so.”

“ Hope so!—I am sure so,” cried Mr. Woodhatch. “ Sit down here while I tell you why I am so certain about it.”

John Woodhatch and his companion sat down under the broad shade of some giant elms, and John, full of his subject, launched into particulars, whilst the young man listened with respectful attention, and answered when required.

“ You have both had time to think it over,” said Mr. Woodhatch. “ It is twelve months since the engagement was concluded between you; you have corresponded frequently, and have understood each other.”

“ So far as it is possible to understand each other without an interview,” assented Greg with a modest reserve, “ yes.”

“ There were reasons for not meeting earlier than this, and I made them plain to you,” said Woodhatch. “ I wanted you both to approach this matter solemnly, and to see it was right and just that two lives, began so badly and desperately together, should end in good faith. She has a true repentance for a miserable past; she looks forward to much

happiness in her new future ; and—so do you, Greg ? ” he asked suddenly and quickly.

“ Yes,” answered Greg, “ I have considered all this. I shall be glad to see her.”

“ She will be here to-morrow afternoon.”

“ So you have told me, sir.”

“ She and her mistress—Morris’s sister, that is,” replied John. “ They will spend a few weeks at Farm Forlorn as our guests, and you will judge for yourself whether she will not make you a good wife, Greg.”

“ It will be a strange meeting, after all these years,” muttered Greg in a low tone ; “ if it could only be less strange, I should feel more composed. If we had not been kept apart quite so long, sir—but you know best,” he added ; “ it was your wish.”

Mr. Woodhatch did not reply at once.

“ It *was* your wish, I think,” said Greg again.

“ It *was* hers,” answered John Woodhatch a little reluctantly.

“ I thought you said——”

“ There, there, talk it over with Kitty, not with me, Greg,” said the farmer impatiently. “ Do not speak as if you had not a will of your

own, and I was the sole ruler of your life. I hate you to consider *that* the position between us."

Here was a loophole of escape for Greg, probably, but he did not avail himself of it. He looked almost with his old furtive glance at the stalwart man before him, as if in doubt for an instant, or as if in hope he would say more. And John Woodhatch waited also, but without result.

"It seems right you two should marry; both free from the sin of the streets and the shame of an early life; both clear away from it, and standing in the light of day. That is what I am so glad to see, Greg," he continued very earnestly; "it repays me for so much, makes amends for bitter disappointments, tells me my own rough life has not been all a blunder, and ends at least in one success. The world is not entirely wrong, lad—and we are not all wrong in it. There is good amongst us yet."

Yes, John Woodhatch was an enthusiast as well as a philanthropist, a hard worker as well as a dreamer; that is, a man who worked hard to make the world better than it was, and so was doomed to endless checks in his

endeavours. The fate of the dreamer; and yet not wholly an unhappy fate, for the light of Heaven falls across it, and the reward is in the world beyond the one which the dreamer would improve.

“ And when you and Kitty are married,” he continued, “ I shall dower you both with Tolland’s farm, near Bleathorpe, so that I may be within reach of you, and able to see how my two waifs of Bolter’s Court progress day by day, and year by year—so that I may bring my friends to see you too, and to watch for themselves your rise in life. For rise you will, Greg, as I have done, by sheer perseverance, by being honest and good, by— There I go again, blowing my own trumpet like an ass. Let us get back to tea. Mrs. Chadderton will wonder what has become of us.”

CHAPTER X.

SEALED LIVES.

WHEN they had returned to the farm and got through their substantial Lincolnshire tea—Greg Dorward poring over a book all the while and evidently studying some complex problem within its pages—John Woodhatch said slowly to his housekeeper, seated in her usual place at the end of the table—

“ We shall have company to-morrow at the farm, Mrs. Chadderton. You will see the best rooms are ready for my guests.”

Mrs. Chadderton, always grave and pensive and obedient, answered without betraying any surprise at the announcement, although there had been no visitors at Farm Forlorn for many a long day.

“ They shall be ready, sir.”

Presently, and after another long silence, she said by way of an afterthought—

“ And the old upstairs sitting-room, where Mr. Dorward studies so hard ? ”

It was a question at which Greg looked up from his book at the grim housekeeper, who did not seem to perceive she had attracted his attention in any way.

“ What of it ? ” asked John Woodhatch.

“ Mr. Larcom used to spend a great deal of his time there, and I thought he would be glad of its use again.”

“ Mr. Larcom is not coming.”

“ Young Mrs. Brake, then—might—— ”

“ Mrs. Brake is not coming,” explained the farmer; “ but her sister-in-law is—Miss Brake, of Boston, with her companion, Kitty Vanch.”

Greg was still looking at Mrs. Chadderton, who in her turn now was staring at the master, with her mouth partly open as though she were taking a long breath. She was certainly startled from her usual equanimity for an instant, thought Greg Dorward, as he turned once more to his book.

“ Lady visitors—both strangers here,” she said at last.

“Strangers at present. Good friends presently,” answered John Woodhatch. “They will not give you much trouble, Mrs. Chadderton.”

“I am not afraid of trouble, sir,” came the slow answer back.

“Why—no.”

“I am too familiar with it—I have seen so much of it—it is part of my life,” she answered wearily.

“Oh no, not now,” answered John Woodhatch cheerily. “Come, come, Mrs. Chadderton, we will have no dull hours this latter time; we have bright days in store for us. See if I am not a prophet in my own country this time.”

“Bright days, and Morris Brake’s sister coming—and her companion,” she added after an ominous pause. “Well, well, why should I doubt it? What business is it of mine?”

She rose from the tea-table at which she had presided and went slowly out of the room, stopping once in her progress to dust the old-fashioned rosewood *escritoire* in the corner, and which seemed to require no dusting. There was a mirror also, of a fashion remote from present times, hanging on the wall that

faced the door through which the housekeeper was departing, and Greg turned round quickly to look up at it, as though he were interested in the exit of Mrs. Chadderton, whose slim figure would be reflected there the longest. And in the mirror, for a fleeting instant, ere the door was closed sharply, Greg saw, to his astonishment, the placid housekeeper throw up both her arms wildly into the air like a woman in dire despair, or very much excited.

Yes, a self-possessed and highly trained young man as regarded nerves was this new Gregory Dorward of ours, for he resumed his book, even took a greater interest in it, planting his elbows on the table, and taking his head between his hands—an action which finally directed the farmer's attention to him.

“What on earth are you studying so deeply, Greg?” inquired the farmer.

“‘Groundworm on Subsoils,’ ” answered Greg.

“I don't believe in learning farming from books,” remarked John Woodhatch. “It wants hard work, a clear head, shrewd calculation, a long experience in land and land produce, and not too much faith in human

nature. You will succeed at Tolland's farm—why worry yourself over books?"

Greg closed his volume and set it on one side.

"Mrs. Chadderton hardly likes the idea of visitors, I fancy," remarked Greg irrelevantly.

"Ah! and it's pure fancy," answered Woodhatch, regarding Greg keenly. "What should it matter to her, do you think?"

"I cannot tell, save that she does not care for strange faces," was the reply. "She did not care for me when I arrived five years ago. And I don't wonder at it. What a blackguard I was! What an awful wretch!"

"What makes you think she did not care for you?"

"Oh! I thought so for a long while."

"You never told me."

"I was afraid to say too much. I was in doubt of everything and everybody. I saw a plot in everything, and that plot working against me. I was naturally suspicious," said Greg.

"Yes—naturally," assented Woodhatch, "I cannot say you have grown out of it altogether," he added dryly.

"And Mrs. Chadderton seemed to know a

great deal of my past life—though she has not mentioned it since the night of my arrival—and spoke very bitterly of the old lot, and of me. And gave me many warnings, by which," he added, with a smile, "I have profited, at any rate."

"Mrs. Chadderton was very much put out that night; the arrival of new-comers disturbs her very much—I have noticed it myself," said Woodhatch. "And very likely the coming of Miss Brake and Kitty will upset her for a while. Once used to people, she is calm enough."

"Yes, admirably calm," answered the young man.

"You do not like Mrs. Chadderton," Mr. Woodhatch remarked; "you have never liked her, Greg."

"On the contrary, I respect her exceedingly. I see what a good servant she is."

"A good servant—true as steel to me," answered the master.

"One more of your successes, Mr. Woodhatch," said Greg; "for she comes from us, she has belonged to us. And here again you are rewarded by the result of your efforts, surely."

“ Surely,” repeated Woodhatch like an echo, “ and she is a grateful woman, Heaven knows ; and gratitude is a rare gift, Greg—one of the rarest.”

“ Did Mrs. Chadderton—— ”

John Woodhatch held up his broad hand and checked Greg’s sentence midway.

“ They are sealed lives at Farm Forlorn,” he said, “ as yours is sealed, as mine is. The curtain has dropped over the past, never to be raised by any word of mine. She may tell you herself, one day, all you are curious to know concerning her. I say not a word.”

“ Oh, I am not curious,” cried Greg quickly, as he rose to his feet. “ She does not interest me.”

“ All the better. Where are you going now ? ”

“ I thought I would take a sharp walk along the sands for half an hour before coming back to a long night’s work at figures.”

“ You study too hard, Greg.”

“ I am strong, and can study, sir.”

“ Very well. Study on. Fancy the boy from Fretwell’s being reproved for extra diligence ! ” he said with a frank laugh, as he went to the door of the farmhouse with him, one

hand pressed affectionately upon his shoulder, as a father's might have rested on a son. At the door he released him, and Greg, nodding towards him, went his way briskly, the farmer watching from the doorway.

Presently Mrs. Chadderton stole to the side of John Woodhatch, like a woman who had been waiting her opportunity to speak to him. She approached him very quietly, standing before him almost timidly at last, and with a face which had become a little pallid, unless the day which was left had set her in strange lights.

"You did not put me on guard, sir," she said in a low tone of voice, and with a faint ring, for all its deep humility, of reproach in it. "You're always so reserved with me—with everybody."

"Time enough to speak when it is time to act, Mrs. Chadderton," he said kindly to her. "Was I ever a man of many words?"

"No. But one should have had warning of this?"

"Have I not given you twenty-four hours of warning, old friend?"

"Yes—but *I am afraid!*" she whispered back.

CHAPTER XI.

APPROACHING EACH OTHER.

GREG DORWARD was not fond of sharp walks along the sands, as a rule. It had not been his habit. Walking was as distasteful to him as it is to most young farmers with good horses at command; but the sands had an attraction for him that evening, and it was possible, he thought, he might walk off a little of that spirit of unrest by which he was beset. Besides, there were matters to think out before people came to Farm Forlorn, and who, for better or for worse, were to influence his whole after life. And he would think them out on the long stretch of sea-sand, where he would be alone, with only a stray gull or two to keep him company—set his ideas in marching order, or bind them hand and foot, if they rebelled against him.

Certainly Greg Dorward had many emotions to subdue, and he had shown himself that afternoon a master of the art of self-repression, for the life ahead was far from clear to him, and there were temptations to get away from it, and a love for Lucy Brake to live down and let never a soul in his new world know it had existed. Lucy Brake would keep his secret, and he would be as silent as the grave. She had altered his history that afternoon ; she had put him in his place and crushed to dust his one little romance, his one folly, and yet the one ambition which would have made of him a different being from that which he must now become, by a force of circumstances beyond his power to withstand.

Yes, he loved Lucy, young as he was ; and though presently Lucy would misjudge him and think how great a hypocrite he had been, still it was none the less true that he would have sacrificed much for her sake, risked advancement from his patron—as Morris Brake had risked all and been content to face the displeasure of John Woodhatch, and defy it—in exchange for the affection of a fair-haired

woman. There was a spell about the young widow which drew men's hearts towards her, and made men foolish; so it was, and as regarded her Greg was disposed to be superstitious. Still it was all over now, he thought, as he tramped along the sands in the early evening, with the light dying out of the sky and the sea murmuring in the distance its solemn requiem. It was all over, for good and all! Yes, for good. He had done his best, and failed. He was unlucky in love; in affairs apart from love he should do well, probably, after the old rule. He could live down his passion—put it, perhaps, completely aside—for he was young and strong, and had many schemes to occupy him, some of them so wild and far away that the folk who believed in him and his common sense would have set him down a visionary, had they guessed half his aspirations. But his dreams would come true; he was patient and painstaking and shrewd—a man who could afford to wait, who knew when perseverance would bring to him its fair reward for waiting, and when it was wiser to say, “Here ends that project. Let it disturb me no more.” He knew

when the end was certain, as he knew on that day that to Lucy Brake he would never be more than an every-day friend, whose coming and going would add not one extra pulsation to her heart. Let that pass, then. As it was to end, it was as well for both their sakes it should end in that fashion. He had been a fool and forgotten to calculate the chances against him—calculating as he had grown of late days, and weighing the probabilities for and against his plans with an accuracy which older heads might have envied. Here he had been at fault; but women defeat all calculations, and Greg was no worse off than Samson, or Mark Antony, or a hundred thousand other heroes. And poor Greg was not a hero, —is not set here as the hero even of our story-book. The stuff of which heroes are made springs not from the fever-dens of Bolter's Rents, with Fretwell's reformatory as a half-way house to Fame. He might achieve respectability at Skegs Shore, he might in time grow rich and buy respect; but he was not thinking of heroism, and had not the least idea what a hero was like.

He should be looked up to presently by

men who wanted employment, or wished to sell him something, or get the better of him in a bargain. They would not know at Skegs Shore or round about Skegs Shore what he had been; they might have their doubts, a few long-headed folk, but Farm Forlorn kept its secrets to itself, and its quiet inmates called no attention to the desert land from which they had emerged. "They were an odd lot at the Farm," it was whispered; but where John Woodhatch picked up his people did not trouble Lincolnshire folk a great deal. They came from a distance, they were pronounced repentant, earnest men and women; and they took John Woodhatch's word for that—a word that he had never been known to break, "odd lot" as he was in himself for that matter, and under suspicion in one or two quarters as he might be still. The knowledge of what Farm Forlorn and its inmates consisted did not extend very far in that out-of-the-way region, where population was sparse, and people were stolid and attended to their own business, plodding on quietly in their mill-horse round of money making, of wages earning, wages spending,

of keeping soul and body together in the best fashion they could.

Greg strode on, thinking like unto this, and letting other, wilder thoughts, as we have intimated, cross his mind ; he walked swiftly away from the Farm, with his gaze upon the wet, hard sands from which the tide had only just receded, and how far he intended to pursue his journey he did not know himself. He was walking towards the legitimate portion of Skegs Shore—where Lucy Brake lived, where Kitty Vanch was keeping house and home for her mistress, where five years ago a tragedy had happened which people still talked over at their chimney corners, where was the railway station, from which people might take train to London and be quit of this !

London ! He had not seen it since he was a boy, but there was something of the old excitement, old rebellion against what was right, and what people expected of him down in Lincolnshire, as he saw the house-tops of the distant village standing out black and well defined against a dusky blue sky, and noticed the white smoke of an engine rising

and curling in the air above them. Strange feeling to excite him for an instant, and make his heart beat faster—strange momentary longing to dash back to the streets, to the old faces, the old life, as if in defiance of advancement, and of all that had raised him from the slough of Bolter's Rents. It was like the old longing which had come to him when he had emerged from the reformatory with John Woodhatch ; for a short while he might have been the untamed, restless boy of sixteen again, distrustful of all good in others and himself, and only anxious to be free of those who had kept him from the streets, his eyes brightened so, and his breath came so short and quick! But it was only for a minute, and then he was no longer desperate and defiant. Lucy Brake had unsettled him more than he had imagined. In losing every hope of her, he had lost so many hopes with which he was connected. And he had loved her, God knows ! he muttered. That confession to himself seemed to make amends for much which he would have preferred no one knowing now—not even He to whom he had thus regrettfully appealed, as

he sank, with a great stone round its neck, the one impulse to fly from Skegs Shore.

As he looked towards the village again, he became aware of a female figure approaching in his direction, as full of thought and with as grave a cast of countenance as though the world were troubling her, or the path across it to the boundary beyond were not more easy to follow or trace to the end than his own. At all events a woman who had chosen this desolate region for communion with herself, and as a safe escape from the gossips and grumblings of the village.

And she was coming his way, step by step approaching nearer to him, and with almost as swift a stride—a being with many thoughts born of the meeting with him to-morrow—a quick-witted, excitable young woman, to whom the future was a mystery that perplexed her, Kitty Vanch.

“We meet before our time, then, despite John Woodhatch’s decree,” muttered Greg, as he recognized her at once.

He had no idea of turning back, of waiting for the morrow. It was as well to understand the position, without strangers to embarrass

them, and set them acting parts which might be foreign to their natures, and to every wish at the bottom of their hearts. This was a new Kitty, as he was a new Greg Dorward, and life was to begin over again for both of them from that night. He walked steadily towards her, and presently she looked up and saw him, and knew who it was, as if by intuition too.

It was as well that they should meet in this way, thought Kitty Vanch also, and it was so much the best; and thus, steadily and gravely—as much like dream-figures as human figures in the twilight, and with the deepening shadows on them there—these two atoms of a great dark world approached each other once again.

CHAPTER XII.

FROM THE PAST.

SHE was the first to speak.

“ Greg ! ” she exclaimed.

“ Kitty ! ” was the quick answer back. Then she put both her hands in his, which had been held out towards her.

It was an impulsive action of theirs, but it was genuine on both sides. A fair beginning of their future intimate relations ; John Woodhatch, planning for their first interview to occur at a different time and place, could not have had one word to say against it. He would have presaged the whole of their future from that first spontaneous warmth of greeting there, and in his sanguine anticipations of what *should* be the happy end of it. He, wise man, would have seen the end of it all, at a glance !

"We have not altered so much, Kitty, to know each other at first sight, and in this fashion," Greg said, with an unforced smile.

"I knew you by a photograph which Mr. Woodhatch showed me a few months ago," said Kitty briskly; "but still I knew it was you in the distance, and 'That's Greg,' I said, as you came along."

"Yes, it is Greg," he said lightly and easily; "and now what do you think of him?"

"You do not give me much time," she answered almost shyly.

"Time's up," was Greg's response.

"Not till to-morrow," said Kitty; "we have met against the rules, after all, remember."

"John Woodhatch will be glad to have spared us the embarrassment of the first meeting in his presence, don't you think?" asked Greg.

"It is very likely. At all events, he will not be angry, seeing we have met by chance, like this," she said. "Shall we walk?"

"Yes; but let us go that way past the village, so that when we turn I can leave you at the end of the lane again," suggested Greg.

"Very well."

They walked on side by side in silence for a short while, each unwilling to break the spell by further words, or to speak of the motive which, after five years' separation, had brought them side by side again. They were a couple who seemed suited for each other now—just as John Woodhatch had striven that they should be. They were both of the same age, both of a new world, doing well in it, and repenting of the old ; their past was of the same dark tints, and they had shared it together, and there could be no reproach on either side ; their fortune was as they chose to make it, with God and John Woodhatch helping them. She was as tall as Greg, having exceeded the common height of woman, and Greg seemed somewhat dwarfed in stature by comparison.

He noticed this, and inwardly wished that he were taller or Kitty shorter on the instant, as if it were settled in his mind now that this match should come to pass.

She walked with a free step by his side, a young, healthy woman, with a bright colour on her face, not wholly attributable to the keen breeze which swept from over the grey

sea towards them. Greg, surveying her askance, thought she was pretty in her way, and with a sharp, bright expression which it was pleasant to confront. He was not surprised; it was the Kitty he had expected to find, the Kitty from whom he would have fled had Lucy Brake said the word, and to whom his heart leaped a little at first sight of, despite all his love for Lucy, and for very love of the dark, bad days wherein they were together and had known no other friends. Strange this, thought Greg, who would have denied to himself all emotion had it been in his power—very strange that he should feel like this.

It was Kitty who spoke first, after all.

“ You will tell Mr. Woodhatch we have met this evening ? ” she said suddenly.

“ The first moment I see him, ” answered Greg ; “ but—you are not afraid he will think this is part of some plan of ours ? ”

“ Oh no ; I am not afraid.”

“ You are not afraid of him in any way ? ” Greg asked a little curiously.

“ Why should I be afraid ? ” asked Kitty enthusiastically ; “ he has been so good and true a friend to me, he has saved me from so

much, he has led me from all that was wrong.
Afraid of him, Greg? Oh no."

"I am glad of that."

"Are *you* afraid?" she asked curiously in her turn.

"I do not profess to understand him, Kitty; but I cannot say I am afraid of anything. Certainly not of John Woodhatch," he replied.

"You regard him as the saviour of us two?" she inquired.

"He is a good man," was the evasive answer; "one more unselfish I have never met, and he has saved us both from Bolter's Rents."

"And that meant death—body and soul," said Kitty.

"Yes."

"And for that you are grateful, Greg—you cannot help being as grateful as I am!" she exclaimed.

"He said only to-day that gratitude was one of the rarest of gifts, and he did not expect it as his reward," answered Greg thoughtfully; "but he has it from you and—from me."

"I am glad," said Kitty again.

“ Of course to you he is a different being from what he is to me,” continued Greg ; “ to you a hero, to me sometimes a hard, stern taskmaster. Seeing him as often as I have done, has been to see his faults, but to respect him none the less.”

“ Ye-es,” said Kitty, as if she did not wholly comprehend the explanation ; and she looked quickly towards him for an instant before looking as quickly away again, as if some little doubt of what this spick-and-span new Greg might mean had crossed, momentarily, her mind. He saw the glance, and read it accurately—and he was not sorry to see it, though it reminded him of old times. This was a sharp, clever young woman at his side, as she had been a sharp, clever girl ; this was one who would be quick to act and judge, and see the truth—when the truth was absolutely necessary!—who would understand him, and be his friend, and know what was best for them both ; who would have unlimited confidence in him very soon, and think there was none like him in the world—not even the owner of Farm Forlorn, who had rescued them from the error of their ways ; who

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answer: “one more unselfish I have never
seen, and he has saved us both from Bolter’s
hands.”

“And that meant death—body and soul,”
said Kitty.

“Yes.”
“I am glad for that you are grateful, Greg—you
cannot help being as grateful as I am!” she
said with a smile.

“He said only to-day that gratitude was
one of the rarest of gifts, and he did
not consider it as his reward,” she were
about to add: “but he has it.”

“Yes.”
“I am glad,” said Kitty.

"Of course to you he is a different being from what he is to me," continued Greg: "to you a hero, to me sometimes a hard, stern taskmaster. Seeing him as often as I have done, has been to see his faults, but to respect him none the less."

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was a sharp, clever young woman at his side, as she had been sharp, clever, and judgmental; this was one who would not be easily deceived, and judge, and see the truth. It was absolutely necessary that he should be his friend, and be their confidenceman, and was the one who

would be like the old Kitty, but with a wondrous difference too.

“We have all our faults, Greg,” answered Kitty thoughtfully, and as though she was reading from a book; “but——”

“Well?” he said, as she paused.

“But they who have no more than John Woodhatch will be pretty sure of heaven,” she added.

“You think *that*—in your enthusiasm?”

“Of course I do.”

“I dare say you are right,” he answered; “he has completely outlived temptation, he would tell you and me, if we were to ask him any questions; and he may not be, even in his own conceit, far from the truth. And if we were altogether wrong respecting him, if he were the worst of men, if he had even killed Morris Brake, say—for the sake of argument—he has been our friend, and we are bound to stand by him.”

Kitty once again looked quickly at Greg Dorward.

“Are you meaning more than you say?” she asked frankly; “if so, let me have the meaning, Greg. I am not as clever as your-

with self—I have not got so far away from it all!"

"No," he responded slowly, "I have not any double meaning in my words. I thought our motto should be 'Through thick and thin for John Woodhatch.' "

"And it is," said Kitty, "trust me!"

"And that being settled," Greg continued, "let us talk of ourselves a little more, and of the benefactor a little less. You and I have met at last, Kitty, and it has been arranged we should marry very speedily. We are both of one mind this marriage should take place. There, is that plain enough, old pal?"

There was the ring of the old days in this new address to her, but she looked at him long and steadily.

"Yes—quite plain enough, Greg," she said.

"And you are prepared to take me for your wedded husband?" he asked, perhaps too lightly to please her, for the quick colour mounted once more to her face.

"If you are prepared to take me," was the ready answer back; "otherwise—not so."

"You have been led to suppose I was prepared?"

“ Yes.”

“ By John Woodhatch ? ”

“ And by your letters to me,” she added.

“ And I am prepared to say, ‘ Be my wife, Kitty. Let us go together hand in hand to the end now.’ We loved each other once very desperately ; if we love each other only half as well, as man and woman, there will come happiness for both of us,” said Greg.

“ You lighten my heart to hear you say so, Greg,” she said, speaking very hurriedly, “ for I—I have been in doubt as to you, a little—fancying it was not likely you and I could ever be much to one another. It—it was too much of a story-book. It was too unlike the reality of any life of ours.”

“ Romantic perhaps.”

“ No, not romantic. Our child-lives were awful facts, Greg. Of late days I have thought it would be better for you that you should not be talked into marrying me. I think,” she added hesitatingly, “ I should have been content with the knowledge you were happy elsewhere. There—that’s all. Don’t look at me as if I was wrong, Greg, for speaking out so plainly. I hate to keep anything back.”

“ We are new characters to each other, but we shall understand each other very soon. Why, I understand you already, Kitty ! ”

“ That is well,” she answered briskly ; “ I dare say you do. I have not anything to disguise.”

“ But I am not clear to you yet. I am not the old Greg.”

“ Thank God, not the old Greg,” she answered ; “ but I think I shall make you out very clearly soon. I am not dull-witted, they say, and am very quick to learn.”

“ I wish we had met two years earlier, Kitty,” he said moodily.

“ Do you ? ” she said.

“ I have always thought it was John Wood-hatch’s wish we should be kept apart till this day ; but he tells me it was yours.”

“ Has he told you so ? ” she asked, looking down at the sands.

“ Yes—this afternoon.”

“ It is quite true,” she answered ; “ as coming from him, you might have guessed it was.”

“ And the reason—may I ask that, Kitty ? ”

“ How warm it is to-night—or how warm I

am!" said Kitty, suddenly fanning herself with the brown strings of her hat; "let us turn back, shall we?"

"If you please."

"Odd it is we two should have met this evening," said Kitty as they turned, "but still more odd to me that you should have put that question, and I should have to answer it at once. Still it clears the ground--it's honest, isn't it?"

She regarded him with her clear unflinching gaze, and with the blushes on her face again. Yes, this was a Kitty he should quickly like. The glamour of the street-boy's love for her was not all gone, and she was the oldest friend he had in the world, after all!

"Yes, it is honest," he replied.

"Well, then," she said, "I wanted to give you a chance of getting away from me, if you wished it—if there was anybody else about you or your new life that you had learned to like. I did not want to stand in the way, or be thrown at you, because John Woodhatch wished we should marry. I thought it more than likely, Greg, we never, never should."

She had thought very close to the truth;

she had understood how such a life as his might drift from hers ; she had understood him better than the man who had shaped their lives out for them. Perhaps she knew human nature better altogether ? But he answered only—

“ You would not have stood in my way, but have made excuses for me. Thank you, Kitty.”

“ Why should you thank me ? ” she asked wonderingly.

“ Because it was fair and square,” he replied.

“ As you would have acted by me, I hope, Greg ? ” she said.

“ Well, yes. I should have told you, certainly, had I been going to marry any one else,” he said, laughing ; “ and I dare say you would have got over that calamity.”

“ To be sure I should,” Kitty responded at once, “ had I not let five years keep you at arm’s length till you had grown out of knowledge almost.”

“ Then you would not have cared ? ”

“ You are a terrible young man to ask questions,” said Kitty quickly. “ Yes, I should have cared—there ! ”

“Cared for me!—the ragged, desperate cur for whom nobody cared, when you left him last!” he exclaimed; “you would, Kitty?”

“I have heard so much of you from Mr. Woodhatch,” she replied; “he has sung so often to your praises. He has told me you were to be my husband; he has kept me a quiet woman by that thought. Yes, you are right; it *was* romantic to look forward to all these years, and passing on from girl to woman, too; but it kept me hopeful, and I thought, Greg, I would grow worthy of you, if I was able.”

“Ah! there’s the question,” he said, laughing again a little wildly, and as he thought a little facetiously—“to be worthy of such a shining light as I am at Skegs Shore. Such a hero, such an honest fellow, such a prodigy to spring from the dust and ashes of a life like mine! Well, do you think you are worthy now, Kitty?”

“I will tell you in a day or two,” she answered; “I do not make you out yet, I have owned.”

“Well, make this out of me at once, Kitty,” he said, still jesting as he thought, or as he thought she thought, but with no smile

now on his dark young face—" that you are a thousand times worthier than I am—than I can ever be. I will look up to you, and not you to me. It will be the right position in life for us. It will, by Heaven," he said now with a sudden seriousness which startled her, and which at least she comprehended.

She did not comment, however, on this little outburst of Greg Dorward's; she would think of it all presently. She stopped now and held out both her hands to him, as she had done at their first meeting. They had turned back, and reached the path across the sand-drift leading to the country lane and the village of Skegs Shore, but Greg had not noticed it, and was now regarding it with some surprise.

" Good night, Greg," she said calmly ; " it is getting very late."

" I will come with you to Miss Brake's."

" No, better not. John Woodhatch might think we were setting him aside."

" Yes—he might. Till to-morrow, then, Kitty, good-bye."

" Till to-morrow, Greg, good-bye."

He was still holding her hands in his and looking at her earnestly.

“ I have got the knitted purse still that you gave me at the railway station,” he said.

“ Ah, I have not been quite forgotten, I see,” she answered almost merrily.

He stooped forward to kiss her, as an affianced lover had a right to do under the circumstances, perhaps; but this was a new and wayward Kitty, whom he did not understand so completely as he fancied that he did. She darted back from him, and with a “ No, no, no,” got her hands away, and went swiftly along the lane and homewards.

Greg was by her side again speedily.

“ I have not offended you ? ” he said.

“ Oh no ; I am not offended.”

“ Truly ? ”

“ Really and truly, no,” she murmured in a strange voice that led him to peer very closely at her.

“ You are crying ? What is it, Kitty ? Tell me.”

“ I am not crying ; that is, not crying very much,” she answered. “ Do leave me, please, Greg. I’m unsettled. I did not think we should have met to-night, or in this way.”

“Tell me why you are crying,” urged Greg.

“I could not tell you. I don’t know,” she answered very hurriedly. “They are tears of happiness, I think, Greg; but I am overwrought. Don’t ask me any more questions; don’t bother me; but let me go. Please let me go !”

The tears were streaming down her face now, and he had never in all her life seen a tear escape her. Yes, she *was* overwrought; she had crossed the threshold of the new career, and met her lover with open arms—with open heart—and it had been an ordeal, remembering the past so well. And she was only a weak woman, like all the rest of them—nothing of a heroine, only a dazed being looking out for the daylight, and wondering how long before the mist would clear for good, and show the fair land steeped in God’s sunshine, and with Greg Dorward waiting for her there. She had had many a dream of this, and now here was the reality, and, with all her courage, it had mastered her.

“Good night, then,” he said again; “but don’t cry, Kitty, any more.”

“No, no, I won’t. Good night; God bless you, Greg.”

And, with the girl’s blessing ringing in his ears, Gregory Dorward went on his way at last, as unsettled in thought as the woman he had left, and tramping quickly and heavily along the dark, wet sands, thinking it over once again and wondering how it would end.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE THIRD WOMAN.

We are not called upon at the present stage of proceedings to analyze very closely the feelings of Greg Dorward, as he sped homewards to Farm Forlorn. He had been surprised, even impressed ; this was a new Kitty Vanch, indeed, whom he had met upon the sands, and she had puzzled him. She was a new factor in his life, and in his plans of life. Should he have power to influence her, or would she exert an influence over him which it would be difficult to resist ? He did not know ; he had been taken off his guard ; the way ahead was indistinct and intricate, and what he thought of Kitty Vanch he was not prepared to declare at a moment's notice of her. As he walked onwards he was sure he was not the calm, calculating young Dorward, alert and observant

and self-possessed, who had left Farm Forlorn an hour or two ago. He was unsettled, inclined to wonder what the end of it all would be, and how it would affect him. In one day to be troubled by two women, he thought ; to feel unlike himself, and inclined to give way to wild impulses ; to propose to Lucy Brake in the afternoon, and to talk of love and marriage in the evening to Kitty, and to feel in both instances that he was terribly in earnest !

It had not struck him that the child-sweetheart, the mad Kitty from the Rents, would have brought back the past so vividly—would have, as it were, linked him at once with it again, he and she having been always callous and disreputable and reckless. He had not looked forward to this ; presently he should work the problem out. He had had enough of female society for one day ; it was astonishing how it had troubled and even discomfited him.

He was not prepared for a third woman to meet him and give him fresh food for thought before he reached the farm—that was altogether beyond his calculations ; but she rose

up like a phantom to scare him for all that. She was standing outside the farm itself, when he came across the reach of sandy grass and narrow footpath into the main road ; he could almost fancy she had been peering through the windows of the farm-parlour like a spy, and had stepped from the garden-front on hearing his footsteps in the distance. Probably all fancy this, but there was the woman in the roadway, and his eyes were keen and strong enough to assure him he had not seen her before, and that she was a stranger to the place. He noticed also as she came a few steps towards him that she was lame, and walked with a stick, upon which she leaned heavily—a woman of spare frame and below the middle height, and with a grave, set face he did not much like the look of, even in the shadows of the night which had now fallen on Skegs Shore.

“Are you a native of this place, young man ?” she asked.

“Yes,” replied Greg, who did not feel called upon to enter into an elaborate explanation of how long he had been living there. To all intents and purposes, and for the sake of

expediting conversation, he was a native then.

“ You know the inhabitants well ? ”

Greg was immediately on guard—very much on guard. His voice became husky and coarse at once.

“ Oh ay—very well. Who is it you wish to find, mum ? ”

“ What is your name ? ” asked the stranger, instead of replying to his question ; “ perhaps it is you I am looking for.”

“ Brown,” was the immediate reply. It had been an uncivil question, Greg considered, to put to him in the open road, and he did not regard the veracity of his reply.

“ You are one of the staff very probably ? ” she inquired, nodding her head in the direction of the farm ; “ the cottages about here are all tenanted by the servants of Mr. Woodhatch, I suppose ? ”

“ Nigh on all of 'em,” answered Greg, not responding to the first portion of her question.

“ And are you in Mr. Woodhatch's service ? ” was the persistent inquiry.

“ When he wants an extra,” said Greg easily.

“ Oh ! that’s all ? ”

Greg did not reply to this ; he had a suspicion already that his questioner did not believe him, she peered so scrutinizingly at him.

“ I am anxious to find a man named Spikins who is resident somewhere in this village , ” she said after a pause, as though it had become necessary to explain the object of her visit.

“ Spikins ? ” repeated Greg slowly.

“ An old man—a very old man , ” she said, “ who has been bedridden for four years or more . ”

“ I know him. Shall I show you the way, lady ? ”

“ Thank you—I—— ”

“ You can’t find him without me, mum, I reckon , ” said Greg in the same disguised voice, and not waiting for the conclusion of her sentence ; “ he lives on the low level, and you might go by it half a dozen times in the dark . ”

“ Might I ? ” answered the lady.

Greg walked very slowly, suiting his pace to his new companion’s.

The houses about Farm Forlorn were scattered, if somewhat numerous, a great many of them, as it were, sunken in the earth, but really built on lower ground, which had dipped suddenly, and where the wind rushing and howling over the fen-land made itself less troublesome and destructive. To the cottages —hovels, even, a few of them—erected here Greg led the way. Before he reached them, he became aware of a basket-chaise drawn very closely to the side of the hedgerows, with the driver placidly asleep therein, and the pony between the shafts cropping the rank herbage by the roadside. This was how the lame woman had got to the neighbourhood of Farm Forlorn, thought Greg, though he made no comment thereupon; and that was the grey, knock-kneed old pony from the Swan, at Skegs Shore: he could swear to the animal, even in the dark.

And this woman at his side was Miss Brake, Kitty's mistress, he said, leaping very quickly to conclusions now—the invalid lady, the stranger. He was sure this was Miss Brake, though, as she was coming on a visit to the farm to-morrow, he could not understand

the reason of her flitting this way in the evening, unless—— Then he said suddenly to his companion—

“ Spikins is an old un, mum ; eighty-eight year, they say. He’ll have been asleep—oh ! hours.”

“ As old as that ? ” muttered the lady ; “ why, he may be dead before I see him. Are you sure of his age ? ”

“ He’s rare and proud of it, and he tells the same story allers,” answered Greg hoarsely. “ Here’s the way to his crib.”

He paused at the narrow entrance to a kind of narrow ravine, approached by some rough-hewn steps flanked by cobble-stones of all sizes.

“ It’s very dark,” she said.

“ If you’ll catch hold of my arm,” said Greg, “ I can help you a bit.”

“ Thank you,” said the stranger, taking his arm at once.

They went slowly down the steps to a narrow causeway, also paved with cobbles. There was a row of doors and windows on their right hand, appertaining to the sunken cottages, and Greg led the lady to the last

in the row, touched his hat in rustic fashion and said—

“This is the 'ouse, my lady.”

“Thank you. I should—I should like to reward you,” she said hesitatingly, “if I were sure I should not be giving you offence. In the dark I can't see what you are. If I am making a mistake, you will excuse me?”

“Anything your ladyship likes, just to drink your health with,” said Greg, touching his hat again. “Shall I wait, mum?”

“No, I can find my way back,” she answered, giving him a shilling, which Greg took, thanked her, and departed. He did not wait for the door to open to the summons delivered on its panels by the handle of the stick she carried—he disappeared like one afraid of the light. But as the door closed on the lady, however, he went back on tiptoe in an extraordinary manner, noiseless and swift, with his back pressed to the cottage walls, and gliding sideways, like an acrobat.

Greg had not given up all his old habits, fine gentleman as he had become, and a love of listening and gathering to himself any scraps of news which might be floating about,

dated from Bolter's Rents and the reformatory. And it might be necessary to listen for John Woodhatch's sake, for the sake of many strange folk gathered about Farm Forlorn—black sheep round the man who had set them in his fold here—and one could never be too much on guard, too careful, he considered.

“You are late, Miss Brake,” he heard a strange, harsh voice say, that was not the feeble piping of poor Spikins, but a voice that even surprised and startled him; “he's been a-worritting all day.”

“I could not come before,” answered the lady.

“You got the message?”

“Yes, Fladge—yes.”

“*Fladge*,” whispered Greg Dorward to himself, “and here!”

CHAPTER XIV.

THE SECRET OF THE MURDER.

MISS BRAKE, late of Boston, Lincolnshire, evidently possessed a strong mind in a weak frame, and was not in any way mentally nervous, or she would have thought twice about trusting herself in a strange cottage down a dark gully in Lincolnshire, and with "stranger folk" for company.

It was a scene which might have deterred any nervous woman, but Miss Brake's dark eyes regarded it unflinchingly. It was a poorly furnished room which she had entered, the street door opening immediately into it; and in one corner of the apartment lay Mr. Spikins, like a waxen image, which time had rendered very dusky and grimy. Mr. Spikins had lain there for some years, attended by one of the female servants from the farm,

or by some willing or unwilling neighbour, when he had quarrelled with the farm-servant. There was always some one ready, as a rule, to nurse Mr. Spikins and generally "care" for him, wages being paid for that service by John Woodhatch ; but, after a few weeks' "turn at him," a change was certain to ensue, Mr. Spikins being difficult to please, and having innumerable complaints to make as to the vile treatment to which the loss of the use of his limbs had unfortunately subjected him. A good grumbler was Mr. Spikins, when he had breath enough left in his body to grumble with, and addicted to bad language always, whether short of breath or not : altogether not a pleasant old man to spend a few weeks with, or for a lady to think of visiting at odd hours of the night, unless on urgent business—as Miss Brake's might be.

It was a grim, ugly old man, too, at whom she gazed with interest, and who looked back at her keenly from under his half-closed lids. He lay there without movement—like a dead man, even—and with two thin, claw-like hands crossed together on his chest, in quite a saint-like monumental fashion. There was a little

table at the head of the bed, on which was a lamp, a basin half filled with gruel, and a paper packet open at one end, and containing tobacco for the invalid to chew—a ruling habit to which he still clung in his latter days, and which had been contracted in his early times of prison service, where smoking was “strictly prohibited,” but where tobacco had always found its mysterious way into the establishment for surreptitious “home consumption.” Mr. Spikins had gone to sleep masticating tobacco, and would be at it again presently, when he had strength to use his lower jaw, and set to work on a lozenge-shaped pellet which had got under his tongue during his slumbers, and would presently have to be coughed into position.

At the bed’s foot, with one ragged arm and knee curled round a bamboo bedpost, sat Reuben Fladge, presenting as disreputable and “uncanny” an appearance as on the evening he had called at Parson Larcom’s, but with some human interest and life in his scared face which Mr. Spikins did not now in any way possess.

Neither of the gentlemen was encouraging

in aspect to a lady-visitor, and any one extra susceptible might have fled with shrieks from either of them. But Miss Brake looked from one to the other very quietly, addressing herself more particularly to Reuben Fladge, whom she seemed to know, and who was deferential to her in an odd, clumsy way, nodding his head even towards a cane-bottomed chair, which looked as ragged and bristly as a porcupine, and saying gruffly—

“ Sit down, won’t you ? ”

Miss Brake, thus solicited, sat down and put her stick across her lap ; then her dark eyes wandered to the figure in the bed.

“ This is Peter Spikins ? ” she said, addressing Fladge without moving her head.

“ Yes, that’s he,” said Fladge.

“ Asleep ? ”

“ Oh no ; wide awake and looking at he,” cried Fladge ; “ he’s rare and lively a bit to-night. Aren’t he, Spikins ? ”

Spikins, with apparent difficulty, winked one eye, and this was evidently intended to convey an answer in the affirmative.

“ What do you want with me ? ” said Miss Brake to the invalid. “ What do you think

you can tell me that I should be glad to know? See, I am here at your wish."

Mr. Spikins did not appear to be particularly struck by this appeal, or by the honour of Miss Brake's company that evening, after all; or he might be considering whether her address was not a little peremptory, for he did not respond to her, although his eyelashes quivered a little, and the eyes began to open more, and stare at the stained ceiling above his head, as if in rapt admiration of two bloated flies there.

"Dumb?" asked Miss Brake of the younger man.

Fladge croaked forth a feeble little laugh of his old double-knock pattern, and said—

"Oh, he'll talk enough soon; the old un takes time to come out of his sleeps—an awful time—allers," was the slow, jerky answer, and without looking at his questioner.

"I am in no hurry. I will wait for him," said Miss Brake.

"He won't talk many times longer, anyhow," said Fladge, with a second laugh, still less hilarious than the preceding; "he's a main bit weaker—half a corpse or more a'ready. Ain't you, Peter?"

Peter winked, or blinked, both his eyes ; but that might have been as an expression of dissent on this occasion, for the shaggy white eyebrows were lowered ominously over them.

Fladge took no heed of this, but went on with singular disregard of any feelings which Mr. Spikins might possibly happen to possess.

“ The doctor says this is just about the end of him—and time it was. He’s been a rare noosance the last four year or so, they say ; and they’ll be glad enough when he’s stowed away for good. I shan’t.”

“ You like him, Fladge ? ” said the visitor.

“ He’s been kind to me ; he’s let me stop here and talk to him, poor old devil,” said Fladge, “ and hide away from Mr. Woodhatch, and Greg Dorward, and all the rest of ‘em over yonder. You know.”

“ Yes, I know.”

“ And he’s been a-worrying about you, mum —dreadful all the day. That’s why I came over to you, you know ? ”

“ I know,” echoed Miss Brake again.

“ He’s not up to much jest now,” said

Fladge, "but he'll wake all of a sudden and 'stonish you. Oh ! he's a rum un. You won't mind him, lady, if he goes it over much ? "

"What is he thinking about ? " she asked.

Fladge looked at Mr. Spikins more intently, then suddenly sprawled full length across the bed, and without the least consideration for the old gentleman's extremities, reached out two long arms and caught hold of the patient's lower jaw. Then ensued a mysterious operation of some kind, fully explained after Fladge had resumed his monkey-like attitude round the bedpost.

"Quid wrong," explained Fladge ; "jest swollering it—that's all."

Mr. Spikins began slowly to munch and mumble his tobacco, and Miss Brake turned to Reuben Fladge as more genial or communicative company.

"Why do you want to hide away from Mr. Woodhatch ? " she asked, in allusion to a previous remark of Reuben's. "He is more likely to be your friend than enemy, is he not ? "

"No—not any friend to me. Oh no ! oh no ! " cried Fladge.

“ You and my brother Morris were dismissed together from the farm ? ”

“ Ay.”

“ Has he not forgiven that ? ”

“ I doan’t know. He was main hard on me—he wouldn’t hear a word,” muttered Fladge, his face falling quickly into shadow.

“ He was hard on Morris, too ; but I do not blame him,” said Miss Brake. “ He had been deceived by those in whom he had put faith. That makes a man—or woman—very hard indeed.”

She stared at the little strong-smelling paraffin lamp upon the table by the side of the basin and tobacco, rather than at Reuben Fladge, and for a moment appeared to have forgotten him. It was only when he broke suddenly into a very husky cough that she looked up again.

“ There is something more which makes John Woodhatch hard on you,” she said ; “ I, who know him better than you, am sure enough of that.”

“ He’s awful hard,” muttered Fladge.

“ You had only to say to him, ‘ Master, forgive me. I am very sorry. I was only a

lad and led away,' and he would not have left you to sink to this miserable plight," said Miss Brake earnestly.

Reuben Fladge crossed his arms on the round top of the half-upright bamboo bed-post, and hid his face upon them, leaving only his shock head of hair visible to the visitor.

"Ay—that's true," he muttered. "He might 'a done so once, afore he thought so bad o' me. Afore he thought I'd killed your brother Morris."

"John Woodhatch thought you did it?" exclaimed Hester Brake with new interest.

"Ay, and a good many mair than Mister Woodhatch. I doan't know why," moaned Fladge, "except I did not like Morris, after he had got me into trouble, and I said so afore he was found dead by the parson's hoose. That's all. That's all I did."

"Have you seen Mr. Woodhatch since that night?"

"Once. And he told me I'd killed Morris—he was sure of it—and he'd have the law o' me, when he could."

"He said as much as that?"

"He did."

Miss Brake looked intently at Reuben Fladge, leaning forward to peer more closely into his face.

“Did you quarrel with my brother on the night John Woodhatch was—so hard?” she asked after a pause.

“Yes. We had words, o’ course,” replied Fladge.

“And you did not kill him?” she asked sharply.

“I never had the chance,” was the sullen answer, “and you ain’t come to hear me say I did.”

“What am I here for?”

“To hear me say, I didn’t, s’elp my God,” cried Fladge with sudden excitement, beating the palm of his broad hand upon the bedstead. “To hear old Spikins there tell you who did,” he shrieked; “for he knows—*he knows!*”

Miss Brake paled a little at Reuben Fladge’s vehemence now, as at a dangerous lunatic’s. She was not prepared for this outburst of passion; she might have been even more over-powered by it had it not been for the last words which had escaped the outcast confronting her.

She turned to the bedridden man, and leaned over him.

“ You know who killed my brother ? ”

Mr. Spikins was looking at her now. He shifted with his tongue the plug of tobacco into his cheek, and then said in a feeble treble, “ Yes—I do.”

“ And that is why you sent for me ? ”

Peter Spikins nodded.

“ Knowing I have pledged myself to the hunting down of my brother’s murderer. Knowing that I shall find him some day, Morris’s wife and all the rest of them having failed so miserably. Knowing—— ”

She stopped as the white, thin lips parted to speak. She would not lose a word which this old man, lying at the point of death, might say to her.

“ I don’t know anything about you—I don’t want to know,” he piped forth. “ It was Fladge told me you were at Skegs Shore. He’s been a-watching you a bit ; he’s followed you from Boston.”

“ You have been good to me at times,” said Fladge, in explanation ; “ and you’ve sent me money. And I wanted you to come to Spikins.”

“ You are uneasy with this awful secret on your conscience,” said Hester Brake, turning to the old man again: “ it weighs you down at last.”

“ No; I ain’t a bit uneasy,” was the slow reply.

“ What, then ? ”

“ I’m uneasy as to what’s to become of me when Mister Woodhatch dies, or goes away. I’m a wonderful age, lady,” he whined forth; “ but it hasn’t left me very strong at present. I’m eighty-nine.”

“ Eighty-eight,” corrected Fladge.

“ You’re a liar, Fladge; it’s eighty-nine.”

And then Mr. Spikins calmly and deliberately swore at Reuben for contradicting him, until Miss Brake touched one of his folded hands.

“ You are too old—too near God’s end of it all—to blaspheme like this,” she said reprovingly. “ You have sent for me to confess the whole truth.”

“ If you’ll make it worth my while—if you’ll pension me like,” he said. “ So much a week, sent regular, *I* want, mum. If it comes in the lump, Fladge or some other rascal’s sure

to steal it, now I can't run after him. Now these damned legs——”

“Why have you kept this secret to yourself?” asked Hester Brake. “Why for all these years have you been silent, in the name of common honesty?”

“I warn't going to be worried at my time of life.”

“There was a reward offered, and you are fond of money,” she said.

“Dr. Gustwich said any excitement would kill me; my 'eart's got a flabby haction, he says. And it wasn't bad fun,” he added, with a sudden shaking of the shoulders in token of considerable hilarity. “To be a-laying here, a-knowing more than anybody else, and a-keeping it to myself, too, so nice and quiet; that's what I liked !”

This was a terrible old man, thought Hester Brake; a wreck from Farm Forlorn indeed, and to whom Farm Forlorn had not done much good, or taught much charity. This was another of the failures John Woodhatch mourned over secretly, she thought.

“Well, Spikins, I will pension you,” she said suddenly.

“Not telling Mister Woodhatch, or I might lose his bit o’ money. Not that that’s much,” he muttered; “it’s doled out beastly.”

“Not telling Mr. Woodhatch till you die,” she answered, with a reserve. “Will that do?”

“Yes, that will do. I shan’t die yet awhile, for all that stupid ass Fladge says,” he added maliciously; “he’s a soft one, he is. A poor lot, Miss Brake. He mustn’t hear a word of it—not he.”

“It doan’t matter to me who killed him,” said Fladge listlessly.

“Oh, you’re not a bit curious, you ain’t!” said Peter Spikins, now quite conversational and lively and ironical; “but we ain’t agoing to trust you. I have often told him old Woodhatch did it, just to aggravate him.”

“I knew *that* was a lie,” growled Fladge; “I wasn’t likely to take that in.”

“There’s more than me has said it, though; and there’s some as think it too, though you don’t,” Mr. Spikins remarked.

“Them’s fools,” said Fladge in reply.

“You get out of callin’ people fools,” croaked Mr. Spikins; “get clean out o’ my

'ouse, and wait till the lady comes to you at the top of the level, will you? We've business to arrange, and don't want you."

"All right."

Fladge got off the bedside and, with his hands in his pockets, slouched bareheaded into the night. Outside the doorway he paused a moment, and then began to run his hardest, as if in pursuit of somebody, coming to a full stop at the bottom of the steps down which Hester Brake had descended some little time since under escort of Greg Dorward. Here he stood and listened, scratched vigorously at his shock head, and then slouched back towards Mr. Spikins's cottage again, encountering at the door Miss Brake, who clutched his arm until he winced again.

"See to my chaise, Fladge; I am weaker than I thought," she said. "I have tired myself out. I am ill."

Fladge shut the door to keep the night air from the lungs of Mr. Spikins, and then, with Miss Brake leaning heavily upon his arm, walked with her along the narrow, uneven path, and up the steps to the high-road. She did not speak to her guide, only breathed

heavily, and once looked up into his stolid face as though she fancied for an instant he had spoken to her. But all excitement had vanished from Reuben Fladge, and all interest in the object of her visit apparently had ceased. He was dull and silent ; oppressed, perhaps, by thoughts of his own which had come to him with the night air—possibly offended, even, at Mr. Spikins's utter want of confidence in him.

They went onwards to the chaise thus, where the driver was still sleeping peacefully in the summer air, with a late dragon-fly buzzing round his nose, and where the knock-kneed pony, with a voracious appetite, was still plucking his hardest at the grass. The moon was rising slowly from the sea, and the stars seemed to have grown very large and bright since she had passed there last. The man was aroused, and glad to see the lady whom he had driven from the lodgings near the Swan—glad to jump out of the chaise and assist her into it, and then clamber to his own perch and wait further orders.

At this juncture Fladge came back to himself, took some money which Hester Brake

put into his hand, and muttered, in a low deep voice, his thanks.

“He is not mad, Fladge, is he?” she asked in a low, excited whisper.

“He’s as right as I am,” was the confident reply.

“Oh! as you are,” said Hester Brake.

“Has he told you?” asked Reuben, eagerly now.

“Yes.”

Then the pony was urged into a trot, and away was borne the woman who had bribed Peter Spikins out of a secret he had kept to himself for five years. She sat very silent and rigid in the basket-chaise, thinking over the revelation of the night; but half-way towards her lodgings she showed she was alive to passing incidents, by calling sharply to the driver—

“Stop here! Some one is coming down the road towards us,” she said.

The man stopped, and Kitty Vanch advanced swiftly to the side of the chaise and said—

“Oh, my dear mistress, I was afraid something had happened!”

“ So there has.”

“ Not to you—no——”

“ No accident. I took advantage of your absence to steal away from home, you see,” she said. “ Step in and sit by me.”

Kitty complied with her request.

“ Why were you coming this way?” she asked, clutching hard at the hand of her companion. “ Did you think if I were in any danger *it* would be found in this direction?”

“ I thought you might have gone to Farm Forlorn.”

“ Why?”

“ I can hardly say,” answered Kitty.

“ I have not been to the farm,” said the mistress, “ but for a drive into the open country. Is it late?”

“ Yes; it is getting very late.”

“ I shall be glad when we are at home,” Hester Brake said wearily; then, retaining the hold of Kitty’s hand, as though she found comfort, or strength, or sympathy by contact with it, the two women were driven back to Skegs Shore.

CHAPTER XV.

THE GUESTS AT THE FARM.

Miss BRAKE and Kitty Vanch arrived at Farm Forlorn in the afternoon of the following day, and received a hearty greeting from the proprietor. They were welcome guests, and John Woodhatch showed they were welcome. He was at the gate to receive them. A tall, handsome, grey-haired man, who doffed his hat as he came down the garden-path towards them, and looked "mine host" to the life. There was a bright smile upon his face also, that took some of the natural gravity from it, as though John Woodhatch were extra pleased that day—which was true enough for that matter.

For here was the success of one of his schemes—a long, elaborate plan, at which cynics and sceptics had scoffed. Here was a

very pleasant and satisfactory end to it, or so close upon the end, with everybody working toward it, that he had reason to congratulate himself already on results, he thought.

"After all these years, John," said Miss Brake as the farmer assisted her to alight from the chaise, "I come an invited guest to Farm Forlorn."

"Is it my fault you have not come earlier, Hester?" he replied.

"Ah! I am not quite sure of that. I have fancied, once or twice, you were not too anxious I should come," she said; "and, with all your kindness to me, not too pressing in your invitations."

"You're a woman of strange fancies, Hester—and," he added, laughing, "you always were, you know."

"Or you have always said so," she replied, looking up into his face with a smile a little forced—a smile that might have hidden pain almost at something he had implied rather than said. "I have been very eccentric in your estimation."

"I don't say *that*, mind."

"But you think it," she remarked; "just

as I think you the most eccentric being I have ever known, and have the courage to say it, too, in your own house."

"Bold woman!" answered John, as he assisted Kitty Vanch to alight. "And see, Kitty, it is with a sharp tongue your mistress attacks me on the threshold of home."

"She will allow no one else to attack you, sir," answered Kitty; "for that I can answer."

"Ah! 'tis well to have a champion," said John, leading the way with Miss Brake upon his arm—"a friend who will fight for our good names, for our credit's sake, when our backs are turned. They are the best of friends, after all."

"Where is the lover?" asked Miss Brake suddenly.

"On his way, as fast as a good horse can bear him, to his lady-love," said John Wood-hatch in reply. "I thought he would get to Bleathorpe and back before your arrival. He will be sorry you have forestalled him."

"Have we come too soon?" asked Miss Brake at this.

"No, my tetchy young woman, you have

not," answered the farmer, laughing; "but you said about five o'clock, if my memory serves me correctly, and it is now striking four."

"So I am better than my word."

"Yes—and all the better for it," was the dry response.

This half-pleasant banter, indicative of the good feeling existing between Miss Brake and John Woodhatch, lasted the remainder of the way to the farm parlour, which was bright with flowers, that breathed a second welcome to them. And standing at the table, in a neat brown merino dress, new for the occasion, and to do honour to the new faces which were coming to Skegs Shore, was Mrs. Chadderton, her left hand busy with her snow-white apron, and rolling it up at one corner very nervously, for all the rigid attitude she had assumed.

"This is another friend who fights my battles, too, Miss Brake, and of whom you have heard me speak very often. The faithful and true housekeeper of my poor establishment—Mrs. Chadderton."

"Yes—I have heard of Mrs. Chadderton," said Miss Brake with a distant bow, and

taking no notice of a hand half timidly held towards her by way of friendly greeting. “I hope our intrusion will not trouble you too much.”

“It will not trouble me at all, madam.”

Mrs. Chadderton looked at Miss Brake for the first time, and with a stern, grave expression, which might have signified anything, from grim respect to grim defiance. But this was generally Mrs. Chadderton’s way; she never smiled, and was not cheerful company. It is doubtful if many people in and around Farm Forlorn, with the exception of John Woodhatch, had been struck by the good qualities of Mrs. Chadderton; and it was certain Hester Brake was not impressed by her, or by the master’s flourish of trumpets over her virtues.

“Kitty will have heard of you, too, Mrs. Chadderton,” said Mr. Woodhatch, not noticing, or affecting not to notice, the frigid greeting between the two; “and you have heard of Kitty Vanch?”

“Oh yes!” said Mrs. Chadderton.

And on this occasion the position was reversed, and it was the housekeeper, erect and

stiff, who failed to recognize a little hand which was readily extended towards her, and as quickly drawn back again, when no sign of reciprocity of feeling was evident.

“Are there any commands?” asked Mrs. Chadderton of Mr. Woodhatch, after this formal reception of the visitors.

“You will show my friends to their rooms, please,” said John Woodhatch, almost with a frown at her, one might have thought, and as if in reproof of her demeanour; “and then I dare say an early cup of tea will not be objected to.”

“Very well, sir.”

Miss Brake, however, sat down in an easy chair by the open window, and quickly took her bonnet from her head, and disengaged a mantle from her shoulders.

“May I feel that this is home, John?” she inquired; “and be unceremonious, and at my ease?”

“I dislike ceremony always,” said John; “and this is home to you, or I am disappointed.”

“I am too tired to go any further,” she said; “let me rest here till the evening, please.”

“Yes, and as you please.”

She held out her bonnet and mantle to Kitty; she could not or would not see Mrs. Chadderton’s movement towards the articles, and then she lay back in her chair, sighed, and closed her eyes. She opened them again widely, though, when the housekeeper said, “If you will follow me, Miss Vanch, I will show you to your room,” and until the housekeeper and her companion had departed, kept her gaze upon them both. When the door was shut behind them she closed her eyes once more, and put one thin hand suddenly upon the bosom of her dress.

“You are unwell to-day,” said Woodhatch.

“I do not feel strong,” she murmured; “but then I am like a child in strength. A little always distresses me.”

“What has distressed you since I saw you last?” asked the farmer.

“I don’t know. I hardly know,” she added, as one who would not wholly commit herself to a false statement, and yet was unwilling to offer any explanation. “The day is very warm, and coming here seems very strange to me.”

“ Shall I leave you? A little sleep—— ”

“ No, don’t leave me directly,” she said; “ I want to speak to you before they come back. A few words, if you will.”

“ Certainly.”

John Woodhatch drew a chair to the window also, and sat down facing her. She was a fragile woman without her outdoor apparel. The folds of her mantle had disguised her extraordinary thinness, as the bonnet, or its trimmings, had given “ tone ” to the swarthy-skinned, wasted little face, in which two dark eyes were gleaming. Now, in her indoor costume, and sitting there with her walking-cane clutched in one transparent hand, she looked ill and weakly enough—one who required great care to make her way in life, even as an invalid.

“ So that’s Mrs. Chadderton ? ” she said to John Woodhatch.

“ Yes ; that is she.”

“ I can’t say I admire your choice of house-keeper,” she added.

“ You don’t like her ? ”

“ No ; I don’t like her,” was the slow, thoughtful reply.

“ I am not surprised at it, Hester,” he said

lightly ; " for you do not take to strangers quickly, and your first impressions are *sometimes* deceptive."

" I should not like her if she were to live till doomsday," remarked Miss Brake. " What a cold, hard face it is ! "

" Hers has been a cold, hard life."

" Ah ! yes, so has been many a poor woman's," answered Hester Brake ; " but one need not look like that. Can you trust her ? "

" I have trusted her for many years."

" Don't trust her any longer ; rather take my warning, and beware of her," she said in a hasty whisper.

John Woodhatch regarded his visitor with close attention for an instant, then he shrugged his shoulders, got up from his chair, and laughed again.

" You are the most uncharitable person I ever met, with any claim to Christian charity," he said ironically ; " but, then, you do not always mean what you say, Hester Brake, and so I forgive your hard words."

" I have not asked your forgiveness," she said abruptly ; " and I am not compelled to

admire Mrs. Chadderton because you do, John."

"Certainly not."

"Morris never cared for her."

"Very likely, poor fellow!"

"He said she was always watching him," continued Hester.

"She is a watchful woman at all times. Why do you quote Morris?" he asked.

"Coming to this house brings back my thoughts of him," she replied.

"Well, you must not be hard or unjust to her because he was," said Woodhatch; "and I want you to take my word that Mrs. Chadderton is a worthy soul."

"You think well of everybody," she said petulantly; "you are so different from me."

John Woodhatch moved slowly towards the open French window.

"What fine harvest weather this is!" he said. "I must look after my men now. I shall not be very long away."

"One moment more. Whom have I misunderstood — not taken to at first?" she asked, reverting to his former insinuation, as though she set store by his words, or they

affected her by their injustice, and were not easily forgotten.

“Lucy Brake,” he answered.

“She told you so?”

“Yes.”

“She is mistaken. I like her.”

“That’s well,” said John Woodhatch, brightening; “that is how it should be, for the sake of Morris, who loved her very much.”

“It is you who are quoting Morris to me now. How is it he is on our minds so much to-day?” she asked. “Is it the visit here—the sad consciousness that he left this house one night to his death?”

“Try and rest for a few minutes,” he said evasively; “I spoke of Morris because you did. I was unwise.”

“I will try and rest, then. I am detaining you.”

“If you require anything, touch that bell,” said Mr. Woodhatch, as he passed out of the window and along the garden ground, by way of a short cut to his fields.

Miss Brake looked round, as if for the bell he had indicated—looked very closely at the furniture of the room, the pictures and

prints upon the wall, the old stone china on the mantelpiece, the Broadwood grand, which had remained untouched since Lucy Brake was there last, nearly five years since ; and, after this critical inspection, she lay back in her chair, a languid, sad-faced woman, to whom life itself seemed a burden to bear.

The house was very still after the departure of John Woodhatch, and she was very tired with her journey. Yesterday there had been great excitement for her, and she had lain " wide awake and staring " all the long night afterwards ; and, in the peace and rest of her new home, she could close her eyes and fall asleep. It was far from a peaceful slumber, however, and disturbed even in that bright daytime by strange dreams, if one could judge by a low moaning, as of pain.

A heavy sleep notwithstanding all this, and from which the opening of the door did not in any way arouse her. Mrs. Chadderton and Kitty Vanch had come into the room together —the former full of attention, despite her stolidity of demeanour, and anxious that the younger visitor should reach the farm parlour again without losing her way along the corridor.

“She is asleep,” said Kitty, at first glance of her mistress. “You will not make any noise, please,” she added to Mrs. Chadderton; “she has had a very bad night.”

“I will take the keys from the cupboard yonder, and go,” replied the housekeeper; and, having been adjured to caution, she went across the room in so perfectly noiseless a fashion that Kitty marvelled at the process, as she herself crept to a vacant chair opposite Miss Brake.

But Mrs. Chadderton did not go after she had obtained the keys and locked the cupboard, lest her visitors should make free with the contents, perhaps; on the contrary, she came to the back of Kitty’s chair in the same ghost-gliding fashion, and touched her gently on the shoulder.

“Is she ill?” she asked in a low voice.

“No, she is only tired.”

“She looks like one at death’s door,” Mrs. Chadderton added. “You should be careful of her, Miss Vanch.”

“I hope I am.”

“One cares always for what one loves; and you love her very much, I am told.”

“Who told you?” she whispered back.

“Mr. Woodhatch has often spoken of her regard for you, and of how much you love her in return,” she replied.

“Has he? Yes, I love her very much,” said Kitty; “she has been everything to me for the last five years of my life, and so God bless her for it!”

“God bless her for it!” echoed Mrs. Chaderton; and as Kitty looked towards her, she added, “Yes, you ought to say that, I think. What would you have been without her?”

Kitty stared at the housekeeper, and felt her heart sink at these words:

“Don’t mind me, miss,” said the housekeeper, “and don’t tell Mr. Woodhatch what I have said. It is a rule here to look away from the past, having lived it down.”

“And your past, then?” asked Kitty wonderingly.

“Was in Bolter’s Rents along with *all the rest of them*,” she said. “Do you despise me very much for that, Miss Vanch?”

“Heaven forbid! Why should I?” asked Kitty.

“I thought you would not, but I thought I

should like to tell you this before any one else did, lest *she*”—nodding to Miss Brake—“ or Gregory Dorward should set you against me.”

“ Neither will try to do that,” said Kitty, perhaps a little too confidently; “ on the contrary, you seemed to despise me—to shrink away from me when I first saw you.”

“ I was ashamed, or flurried—I don’t know which. I——”

“ Hush! not so loud; you have awakened her. See! ”

But Mrs. Chadderton did not stop to see, but went very swiftly from the room, as if afraid at present to meet Miss Brake’s gaze, which, the instant after the door closed, was fixed upon Kate Vanch.

“ Have I been asleep? ” she asked. “ I did not hear you come in.”

“ You have been sound asleep,” said Kitty.

“ Who has just left the room—Mr. Dorward? ”

“ Mrs. Chadderton.”

“ Where is she now? ”

“ She has just left me.”

“ Come here and listen, Kate,” said Miss Brake with evident excitement.

Kate Vanch crossed to her side, and bent down her head to listen, as commanded.

“I am here to watch her; I have brought you to watch her, too; and to gain in some way—in any way—if possible, her confidence.”

“But your manner when——”

“Yes, yes; I know. I was not prepared,” answered Miss Brake hurriedly. “She will take to you presently; but you must be always on guard too, Kitty, lest she deceive you in your turn. A terrible woman, I am sure.”

“I hope not. I think not.”

“It is not to be all love-making at Farm Forlorn, remember,” said Hester Brake bitterly; “we are in the house whence Morris was spirited away, and where his death was planned.”

“Pray do not think of this, Miss Hester—not at this time.”

“This must always be to me a house of sorrow,” she replied; “and I have always avoided it. But he brings me to it at last.”

“John Woodhatch?”

“No. Morris.”

“Oh, Miss Hester, Miss Hester!” entreated Kitty. “You will not brood on this again—

not now, when there is a prospect of happiness for me. Is it fair?"

Hester Brake rested her thin hand on the soft dark braids of hair inclined towards her.

"Youth is selfish, and love is more selfish than youth—and I have outlived both, Kitty, oh, so long!" she murmured. "There, I will not weary you. I only wished to warn you."

"Of Mrs. Chadderton?"

"Yes. She knows who killed my brother!"

CHAPTER XVI.

UNSETTLED.

MISS BRAKE was not talking in her sleep ; on the contrary, she was calm and matter of fact in her stern decisiveness. She spoke as if she knew, thought Kitty Vanch, who accepted the assertion, and did not in any way gainsay it, although one natural question escaped her at the moment.

“ Who told you ? ”

“ I have found it out ; but there are reasons why I should put you on your guard against this woman,” she replied, “ and you can guess them now.”

“ Yes.”

“ You must be watchful of her—always.”

“ But will she ever disclose——”

“ Oh, I do not want her co-operation,” cried Miss Brake, [almost scornfully, “ or

her evidence. It will be complete without her, and I shall face them with my proofs some day. I see it all now—to the end."

Wise woman who saw so much, and who would presumptuously shape out the workings of her little world ; who saw virtue triumphant and vice overwhelmed, as by God's hand it should be ; who, from her misty cloud-land, as from heaven, saw the iron Hands of Justice dragging forth to the light the shivering, pitiful Cain, who had lain in ambush all this while !

" What motive could Mrs. Chadderton have had in keeping back the truth ? " said Kate Vanch ; " whom has she tried to screen, I wonder ? "

" We shall not wonder very long," was the confident reply. " And now, do not speak of this again to me, or to any one in this house. It's my secret, no one else's ; my plan of action, not yours."

" I will try and not think of it," said Kitty. " But oh, dear mistress, if you could set it aside, too, for a while ; if you only would ! " she entreated.

" Is it possible ? "

“There have been so many dark days in your life, which I had hoped this visit would brighten—which I meant to help to brighten, thinking this would be a pleasant holiday,” said Kate.

“Pleasant holiday!” echoed back Miss Brake. “I am like that strange young woman whom my brother Morris married, and there is no pleasure in the world for me. Why should there be? Why should it come to one so dissatisfied and suspicious as I am—as I have always been, Kitty?”

“Oh no, no; you have not.”

“Pleasure is for the young—for men with money, sometimes; for girls with lovers, always,” she said thoughtfully. “And yet what a crowd of disappointments, Kitty, comes to him who schemes, and the woman who dreams!”

Kitty looked wonderingly at her, as if this mournful musing were scarcely in her usual tone, or to be reconciled with many words and acts preceding yesterday—as if she were disposed to believe in happiness herself, and to take credit for some brighter days in store for her. For Greg loved her, as in the old, bad

days, but with a different heart ; and she loved Greg Dorward very faithfully. Only a few days back Miss Brake had spoken of the promise of her future, and now she seemed to warn her, although she had said that pleasure was for girls with lovers always. How did she know that, unless from story-books—she who had stood apart from love and lovers all her life, despising it and them, as one soured by long illness, or a plain face, might do with some excuse, poor thing !

There was no further conversation on this subject. When Kitty would have replied, the invalid lady raised her thin hand in protest ; and the companion, trained to obedience, was silent, and silent very willingly. Presently Miss Brake closed her eyes again, and Kitty did not venture to disturb her. There were brighter thoughts for her, and the death of Morris Brake lay five years back, and had affected her at that time by the mystery surrounding it, and by her depth of sympathy for the sister's grief, rather than by any absorbing interest she had experienced herself in the young fellow struck from the life-roll.

She was almost doubtful if Miss Brake had

gained any fresh intelligence, and whether this was not another phase of eccentricity on her part. That she said and did strange things at times, no one knew better than Kate Vanch. She was often harsh and repellent, but more often still full of a Christian sympathy with the unfortunate of her kind, that was remarkable even in a tender-hearted woman. Hence an inconsistent female, which is a *rara avis* at all times, we trust.

Coming to Farm Forlorn had disturbed Miss Brake, thought Kitty; and as the mistress was disposed to judge by first appearances, it was possible she had disliked the look of Mrs. Chadderton. For, thought Kitty, she had done that herself, and had felt a little frightened of the housekeeper, who had so hard and strange a face, and whose deep-set eyes looked at her and her mistress so inquiringly—perhaps so unlovingly, as at intruders in a home which she had ruled with a mild despotism, but still a despotism, for more years than the new-comers were aware.

And Kitty Vanch had Greg to think about—a pleasanter subject than Mrs. Chadderton, or mystery, or murder. Here were fair memo-

ries of last night's wanderings by the sea-shore with him, of all that he had said, of more that he had implied ; and her mistress's sad words did not overcloud her long. Kitty's heart was against it ; the very day, with its sunshine, its birds and flowers in the garden beyond, was against it ; even the drowsy hum of the bees spoke of calm content and honey-gathering ; and the young girl's heart was full of gratitude for the great change in her life. Bolter's Rents lay further back to her than to Greg Dorward. She could scarcely believe now in the reality, it was all so distant and obscure, so hideous and unreal ; an enigma, a wild dream. She had been one of the many wholly despaired of ; she remained one of the few who had gone steadily upwards, looking neither to the right nor the left. Yes, John Woodhatch, clumsy philanthropist as he had been, had done good service here ; he thought so himself, as though the work was done for good, and he had never heard in all his life that it was in humankind to err.

“ What are you thinking of, Kate ? ” came the sharp voice of Hester Brake upon Kate's ears at last.

“ I—I hardly know.”

“ You were smiling—almost laughing.”

“ Was I? I am very sorry,” answered Kitty, in good faith, and with no satirical intent in her apology.

“ You have nothing to be sorry for. I am glad you are happy already,” Hester said, rising. “ Let us walk in the garden for a little while; this room is very stifling.”

“ I will fetch your bonnet.”

“ No; this will do.” And very quickly Miss Brake twisted a white handkerchief over her head, and without much regard to the effect which such an extempore covering might give to her personal appearance.

“ The sunshades too,” added Kate.

“ Trees are the best sunshades,” answered the mistress; “ and there is a seat under that big apple tree yonder, is there not?”

“ Yes.”

“ Let us go, then, Kate. It will be cooler than in the house.”

Miss Brake’s wish was a command, and offering her arm to the delicate woman, Kate Vanch escorted her mistress into the garden which stretched round Farm Forlorn,—a fine

expanse of flowers and fruit trees and grass plat, from which innumerable standards, rich with roses, sprang and flourished.

“It is a fair picture,” said Hester Brake, when they were seated under the apple tree, and were looking across the lawn at the long length of farmhouse with its latticed windows blinking in the sun. “Why did he call it Farm Forlorn, as if he had foreknowledge of the misery to come?”

“It was called Farm Forlorn before his time, I have heard him say.”

“Oh yes. I had forgotten,” said Hester. “I remember Morris’s being full of a legend that the old house stood alone years and years ago, and the sea came closer to its walls. It was a smuggler’s hiding-place in those old days. It is a murderer’s now.”

“Do you think the murderer is there, then?” said Kitty in a low tone—“still living in the place?”

“I do not say that, exactly. Who can tell? Speak of something else, Kate,” she said tetchily; “you have had enough of my misery to-day. Tell me of your brighter thoughts.”

“What will they be, I wonder?” replied Kitty, not wondering very much for all that. “I have had so much to think about since I came.”

“Yes, I suppose so,” said Miss Brake absently.

“Do you think Mr. Woodhatch will ever marry, madam?” asked Kitty somewhat irrelevantly, and for the sake of starting an entirely new subject for discussion.

Hester Brake started, and turned towards her companion to see for herself—and if it were possible—whether there was any covert meaning in the question. But the frank, clear eyes were sufficient evidence of fairness.

“What a question, Kate! Why should I think of it?”

“It has often seemed to me so great a pity.”

“What has?” came the sharp inquiry at this, too.

“So great a pity, I mean, that he should have remained a single man all his life. He so good and honest and earnest—so deserving of—of—”

“Of a termagant, or a fool, to sit by his

fireside and worry him. Is that what you mean ? ” asked Hester Brake, who was certainly hard to please on any subject that bright afternoon.

“ Not exactly. Why should it be either of the two ? ”

“ He would go to extremes—from Lucy Brake, a good-looking simpleton at best—— ”

“ Oh, madam ! ”

“ I think so—for she was romantic, and made a hero out of Morris, and we know what poor Morris was. From Lucy Brake,” she continued, “ John Woodhatch would pass to the other extreme, and marry a scold, if he took to himself a wife now.”

“ I don’t see—— ”

“ And you don’t know, Kate ; and all this is speculative maundering which tries my temper not a little,” she said. “ But I am in a fretful mood to-day. Bear with me, please. I shall want your help, true friend,—and soon.”

“ Trust me,” answered Kate Vanch very readily.

“ As you will trust me—always ? ” said Miss Brake.

“ Yes.”

“ Hating me never—under any circumstances ? ” she asked very anxiously.

“ Oh ! never, Miss Hester—never ! ”

“ Remember that,” she said ; “ remember you have promised that.”

CHAPTER XVII.

THE LOVERS.

HESTER BRAKE and her young companion had not sat long in the garden ground of Farm Forlorn before Greg Dorward came across the lawn towards them.

Kate, who first saw him advancing, gave a little start of joyful surprise and said—

“Here he is. I thought he would not be long.”

“So this is he,” said Miss Brake in a lower tone. “How strange it seems that I see him for the first time—having heard of him so much ! ”

“Strange to me, too, that this should seem like the beginning of a new life.”

“It is the beginning,” answered the mistress. “How it will end, Kate, it is not for you, or me, or *him* to guess.”

Kate turned quickly to her, and Miss Brake added almost satirically—

“It is for John Woodhatch, the wise master, who regulates Greg Dorward’s life, and sees it keep step with your own. Introduce me—he is here.”

Greg was close upon them. He raised his hat as he advanced, and with an easy grace, too.

“And this man comes from the prison and the reformatory,” muttered Miss Brake. “Yes, it is remarkable.”

“Kitty,” said Greg, shaking hands with his *fiancée*, “I am sorry I was not here at the time of your arrival. May I say welcome to you, though a little behind time?”

“Yes. Thank you,” said Kitty; then she turned to her companion and added, “This is Mr. Dorward, Miss Hester. Greg, this is my true and tried friend, Miss Brake, whom you know, by report, so well.”

“Whom I hope to know better by the honour of a personal acquaintance,” said Greg, with a low bow.

Hester Brake bowed low in response, but did not offer to shake hands with him, as

under all circumstances Greg thought she would have done. She regarded him very intently, Greg thought almost rudely, and said—

“Have we not met before?”

“Oh no.”

“Your voice seems familiar to me,” said Hester Brake, thinking perhaps of the last night’s meeting, wherein Greg had flattered himself that he had well disguised his organ of speech.

“No, Miss Brake, I have not had the pleasure of meeting you before,” said Greg, who amidst his manifold accomplishments certainly possessed the art of lying with facility and frankness.

“It is always a matter of interest to me to meet any one who has known my brother Morris,” she said, speaking very slowly. “Sometimes I hope to obtain from one or another of his past acquaintances a clue to the mystery of his death. I do not despair.”

“It is a mystery which, in my own small way, I have endeavoured to solve, Miss Brake,” said Greg politely but gravely, as beffited the solemnity of the subject.

“And without result?” she added.

“Without much result—at present.”

“Oh, then, you have a clue perhaps—an idea—a theory,” she said; “your living here so long, knowing Morris so well has——”

“Pardon me, but I knew very little of your brother. I came here as a youth, and within two days afterwards he was murdered. We had not exchanged a dozen words together, I should say—I was a boy, he was a man.”

“Mr. Dorward, I have not come to the farm to oppress everybody in it with what seriously distresses me,” she said by way of explanation. “After to-day, I may not allude to my brother’s death again, whatever I may think or do. But coming here for the first time in my life has, Kate will tell you, terribly unsettled me, and the old sad business rises up again. I have been told by Mr. Woodhatch you are a singularly acute and clever young man——”

“Mr. Woodhatch is too kind; he flatters me too much,” said Greg with a deprecating manner, and laughing a little even, though he did not take his eyes from Miss Brake, whose earnestness interested him.

“And doubtless you *are* clever,” continued Hester without heeding his interruption, “or Mr. Woodhatch would not give you so good a character. Will you tell me your idea as to the motive for my brother’s murder—and then the subject shall not be mentioned between us again?”

“I have no fixed idea. The mystery was too complete,” Greg replied. “I can only imagine some long, desperate grudge against him, or——”

He paused for a moment and then went on.

“Or some one profiting very much by his death, and in a way that is not clear to us. Had he been rich, had his death meant riches to another, there would have been a motive, which seems wholly lacking now.”

“Yes,” said Hester Brake very thoughtfully, “had he been rich. And the person or persons benefiting by his decease would have incurred your suspicion?”

“Most assuredly.”

“They would be—they are—Lucy Brake and myself, then,” said Hester. “My father died in Paris, a rich man. His money passes presently to Morris’s wife and child, and to

me, the sole surviving daughter of Julian Brake."

"Oh, I was not aware of this," said Greg, "and of course I should exempt——"

"Probably you would," she said, not waiting for him to complete his sentence; "and as neither Morris nor I knew of my father's position—for he had deserted us when we were children—the question of money could not have affected Morris's death. The motive was revenge."

"Had he any enemies?"

"Yes."

"Mrs. Brake thinks he had not an enemy in the world," said Greg.

"Lucy Brake cannot tell friends from enemies," said Hester, rising; "and her poor idea of the world is limited to Skegs Shore."

Kitty rose with her mistress, but Miss Brake said, quickly—

"Stay here, Kitty. You would like to talk to Mr. Dorward, and the heat is too great for me. I would prefer to be alone."

"Very well, madam."

She had come into the fresh air, complaining of the heat of the farm parlour; she was

going back to the house with a protest against the closeness of the outer atmosphere—evidently a woman hard to please. Kitty had made a movement to escort her, as usual, but she waved her back almost impatiently, and then crossed the lawn. As she entered the house through the open French window, by which she had passed from it, Greg sat down by the side of his betrothed, looked at her, and laughed.

“A trifle eccentric, I should say,” he remarked.

“But a good, earnest, honest lady always, Greg,” added Kitty.

“Ah, very likely; but has she come here to talk of murder?” asked Greg. “Is the death of her brother always in her thoughts like this? If so, what a cheerful companion she has been to you all these five long years, Kitty.”

“She has seldom spoken to me of her brother.”

“Something has disturbed her lately?”

“Her visit to this house, I think,” said Kitty; “but I don’t know—I can’t say.”

“And it is not worth while speculating upon

it, Kitty," he replied. "It affects neither your life nor mine—and we are a young couple emerging out of the shade. Guess where I have been this afternoon."

"To Bleathorpe?"

"Why, how do you know?"

Kitty laughed pleasantly at his surprise.

"Mr. Woodhatch told me you had ridden over," she explained.

"Did he tell you what for?"

"No."

"Ah, there's the rub," cried Greg; "and that's like his generous self. Upon my soul, after all, there never was but one John Woodhatch!"

"You think so?"

"I do. I am only sorry, Kitty, that his schemes are often so wild, so full of little mysteries and surprises, so grand in design, but often so impossible to realize; so full of complications to the very end," he said a little ruefully.

"But in the end turning out so well, sometimes," added Kitty.

"Not very often; but, in our case, a complete success. Is it not?"

“How should I know?” rejoined Kitty in her natural brisk manner.

“Everything was against you and me—and yet, here we are, Darby and Joan.”

“And what did Darby want at Bleathorpe?” asked Kitty archly.

“To see the farm which has been taken for us there—the new home which John Woodhatch places at our disposal—which I am to pay for some day—any day—so that I may not feel too dependent on him now. As if I were not dependent on him for my very life, Kitty.”

“I am glad you are grateful, Greg,” said Kitty, “that you see this man, our benefactor, as I have seen him for myself. A something more than man to me—whom I do not understand, he is so much above me and beyond me?”

“This is enthusiasm, Kitty,” said Greg; “but I don’t blame your warm heart for it—although John Woodhatch is very far from faultless. If he were, I should love him all the less.”

“What should we have been, you and I, Greg,” said Kitty in a low voice, “without John Woodhatch?”

"Yes," said Greg, looking down, "that's it."

His face changed and was strangely moved, almost distorted, but it was only for an instant, although Kitty Vanch perceived it and wondered at the emotion or pain—she was doubtful which—that had affected him. He was very quick to recover—to become a different Greg, a ready-witted, sharp, humorous young fellow, pleased with himself and her, and with the prospect stretching out before them, the reward for diligence and faith and obedience — implicit obedience — to John Woodhatch. They were more like sweethearts than they had been yesternight; they were more like old friends with perfect confidence between them, and love not greatly demonstrative, but lying, like a jewel, at the bottom of their hearts. They did not speak of the past again, but always of the future. The past was surely dead and hidden under withered leaves, which no adverse wind could stir now. This was a new Greg Dorward, thought Kitty, and yet something like the old—something like him in his acute perceptions, his strange doubts, his total want of fear, even in his courage to confront opposition. Greg was

sanguine of his future, he believed in his advancement, he spoke lightly, almost defiantly, of the difficulties in the way of his success, he was in the highest and best of spirits.

John Woodhatch came towards them while they sat there.

“So you two together at last!” he said heartily; “just as in the picture I have painted.”

“Greg has told you we met by accident last night?” Kitty hastened to remark.

“Yes. Greg keeps nothing back; and I have forgiven both of you for stealing a march upon me,” replied John Woodhatch. Then, turning to Greg, he added, “Well, does Bleathorpe please you?”

“Yes, sir; very much.”

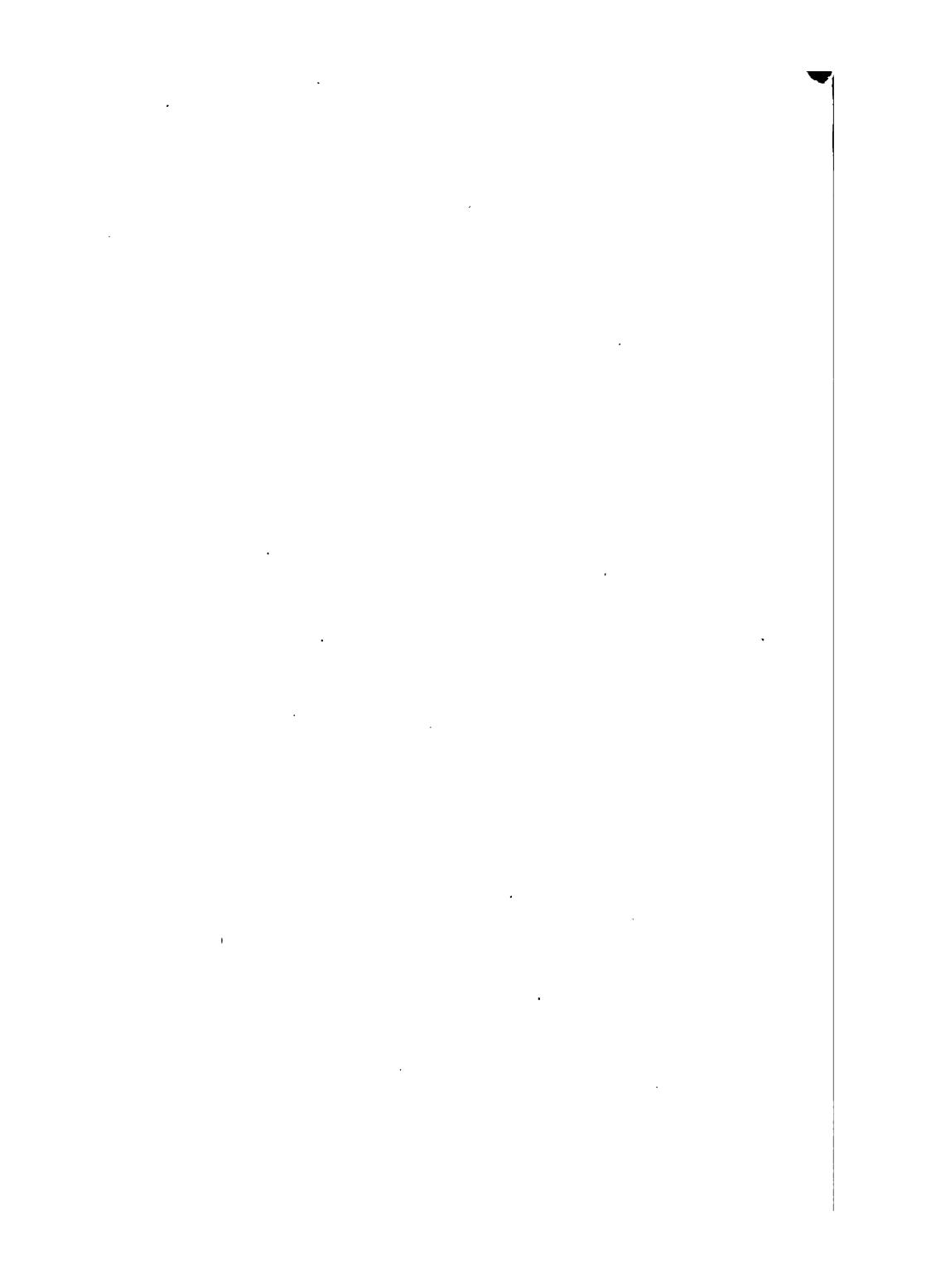
“You will do well there. It’s a little farm, but it is a beginning, and everybody has prospered at Tolland’s Farm, Greg. So you two together at last,” he said again, and this time with more exultation; “and the life began so desperately, and with such surroundings, ending very peacefully.”

“Thanks to you,” murmured Kitty; “to you alone, sir.”

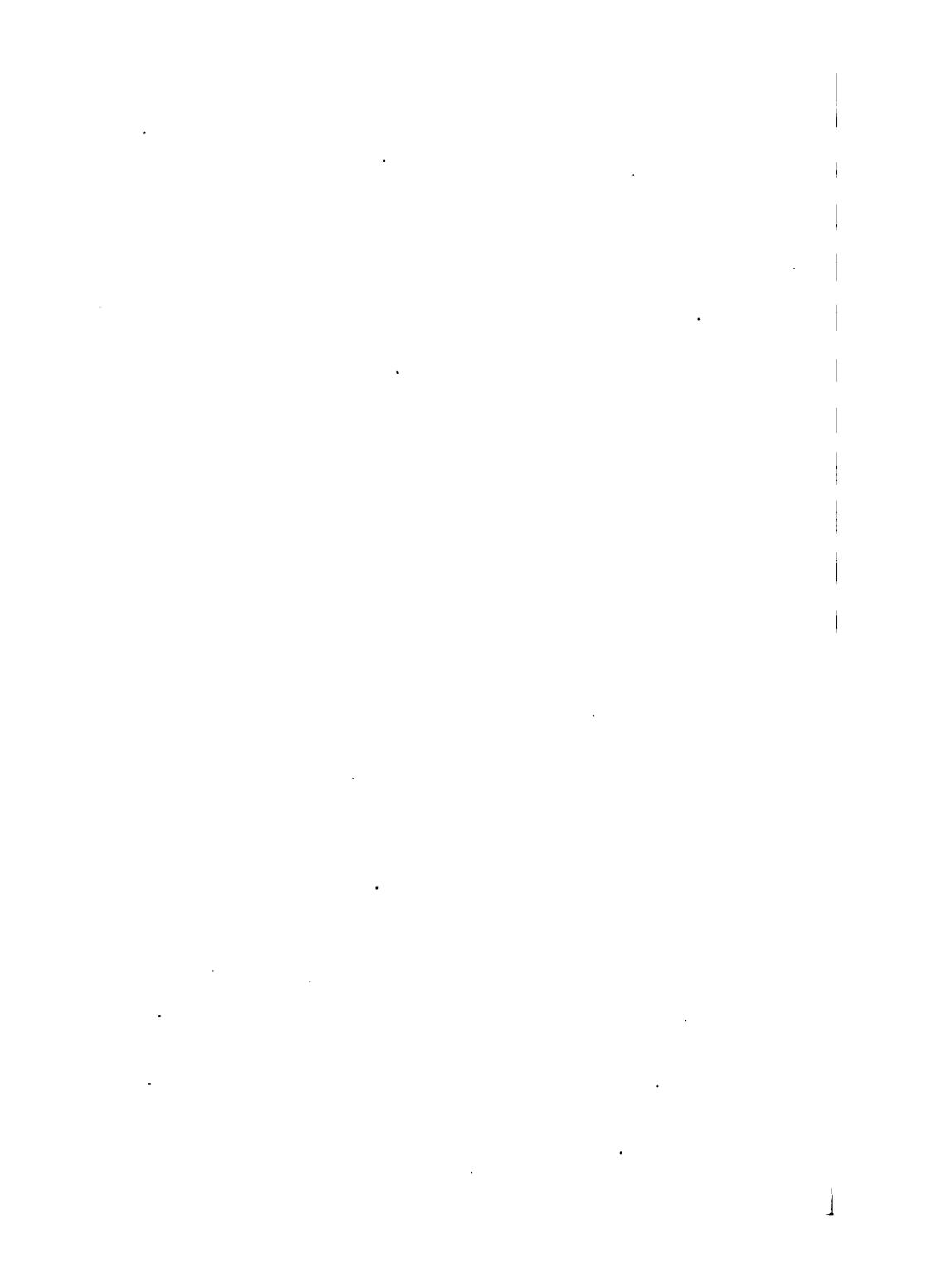
“Both repentant,” he continued; “both meeting again with new and contrite hearts, with hearts full of hope, and both so young still. It was right I should plan for this as the best thing; the only thing I could do for my poor waifs.”

Yes, he was very sure it was for the best, and it was satisfactory for him to consider he was sometimes right in his judgment, and not always blundering in the dark.

“What will that old sceptic, Alec Larcōm, say to this now?” muttered John Woodhatch; “he who prophesied the folly of it all!”



BOOK THE FOURTH.**APPROACHING THE TRUTH.**



CHAPTER I.

IN GOOD SPIRITS.

To most of the characters of our story there seemed peaceful days at Farm Forlorn after Miss Brake and her companion had “settled down.” There were those amongst them believing in the better days now, John Woodhatch and Kate Vanch especially; there were others merely hopeful, and one or two who only saw the treacherous calm before the storm, and were prepared for the oncoming tempest, and the rage of the black night.

Still all was outwardly very peaceful; and they were talking of a marriage in a few weeks, when the young folk thoroughly understood each other, and, added John Woodhatch jestingly, “when the harvest was all in

and he had more time to attend to 'life's frivolities.' "

Miss Brake had said no more about her brother, but had assumed her usual manner, and was often companionable and chatty, and very much like an ordinary middle-aged lady, who is ailing and crotchety, and in a state of single blessedness. It was only when she was alone, or thought she was alone, that her face took grave shadows to itself, and the dark, deep-set eyes seemed looking straight ahead of her, as at something in the distance which dismayed her, as a spectre might have done, standing in the grey dimness of another world, and looking from it towards her.

Mrs. Chadderton had noticed these moods, no one else ; but then, Mrs. Chadderton was a woman exceedingly observant. The man who had been murdered had been known to say of her that, "she was as watchful as a cat ;" and certain it was that very little passing at Farm Forlorn escaped her vigilance.

Still it was a place where those in authority had a right to watch, where it was part of the duty of all trustworthy subordinates. They were a fair average of quiet men and women

in service there at that time, and our story does not touch upon them or their actions ; but they were people chosen by John Wood-hatch, and brought from various strange places, hard and stony atoms of humanity, who would have gone speedily to the bottom of the gulf, without his helping hand and generous encouragement. He was a persevering man, whom disappointment had not daunted. He had been discouraged very often, he had owned his mistakes, he had experienced much ingratitude, but his heart had never wholly failed him ; and there had always been some little sign, some little green blades peeping up from arid soil, to reward this strange man for his work. It was his life's task, and he did not flag by the way ; and here was his duty, salutary always, if distressing at times.

And whether successful, or a failure, most of these men and women loved him, and seemed very quickly to fall into his ways. Bad as some might be in themselves, he was the master over them striving to make them better, and even the despairing, the irreclaimable, in drifting from him and his help would

cry “God bless you, sir!” before they were swept down the torrent away from their last chance.

In the calmness—may we not say the false security?—of the present time sat John Woodhatch late one summer’s evening in the parlour of Farm Forlorn. Supper had been over half an hour or more, but he had lingered with his guests, and somewhat contrary to his general rule. It was a warm night, with the moonlight streaming on the sea and fenland lying beyond the farm, and close to the open window facing him sat Hester Brake, almost buried in the big arm-chair which her host had always insisted upon her occupying, and despite her protest at being considered an invalid, from the day of her arrival. At her feet lay Carlo—a dog who had grown a little old, but was still strong and of service, and who had evinced much gratitude for the attention he had lately received from her; and in the background, playing draughts, sat the engaged couple, happy enough to all outward seeming—happy one of them at least, in the reality.

Miss Brake had glanced towards them once

or twice, as if deeply interested in their movements, and John Woodhatch, smoking his long clay pipe—his one indulgence after work was over for the day—glanced more than once at her.

Suddenly she caught his gaze, leaned towards him slowly, and touched his hand.

“I wish you were not so proud of your work, John,” she said earnestly; “not so sure of its being for the best.”

“This coming marriage?” he said in the same low tone which she had adopted.

“Yes.”

“You have thought with me for five years it was best. You have been one of the very few to encourage the visionary,” he said smiling.

“What a time that seems ago—ages!”

“Don’t you like Greg on further acquaintance with him?” he asked curiously.

“I am hard to please, John,” was the evasive answer, “and I see——”

“Well?” he said as she paused.

“And I see disappointment may come to you, and them,” she concluded. “They are strange lives after all, and you should be prepared for strange results.”

“Have you anything to tell me?” he asked.

“Not about them,” said Miss Brake, “something about myself, and others, if you will listen.”

“Proceed, Hester.”

“I don’t mean pretend to listen, and be staring over my head or shoulder at something a hundred miles away—as you do sometimes,” she said.

“Do I?” he said, laughing; “well, that is very rude of me. Now, I am all attention.”

“I made my will to-day, John,” she said in a lower voice; “a practical and business-like will.”

“Indeed?”

“And without much to leave at present,” added Miss Brake; “but then, there are expectations, and I may be a rich woman before the week is out.”

“You have had news from abroad to tell you this?”

“Yes.”

“I congratulate you.”

“I don’t want to be congratulated upon becoming a rich woman,” she answered

peevishly ; " and I don't want you to ask me how I have left my money,—though I will tell you, if you like."

" No, I don't want to know. I think I can guess," he said, looking towards Kate Vanch.

" You never guessed right in your life—you are a gigantic mistake, John," she said acrimoniously.

" Very well. Then I will not attempt to guess, only to say this though," he added, " that if you have forgotten Kitty, or your brother's widow——"

" *She* will be rich enough," said Hester quickly at this ; " rich as myself."

" Or Alec Larcom——"

" Why, you are dictating to me what to do," cried Miss Brake, " and when it's done already ? "

" Just allow me to finish," said John good-temperedly. " I say, if you have forgotten these, or been foolish enough to pitch your money at me, it will be a dead failure."

" And suppose I have pitched it at you ? "

" Then I shall divide it after my own fashion, never touching a penny of it myself."

Miss Brake shrugged her shoulders.

“Why should I bequeath money to a man who is already well off,” she said, “and who would be sure to misapply it? Who would only surround himself with more offscourings of the gaols and risk his life that way, as Morris’s was risked—and lost.”

“There, there—let us change the subject.”

“Take care of my will then—will you.”

And Miss Brake drew a long envelope, sealed with black wax, from the pocket of her dress and almost pitched it at him. John Woodhatch caught it adroitly, looked at the superscription a little critically, and then put it in the side pocket of his coat.

“I will lock it in my iron safe there along with my own will,” he said.

“Thank you.”

“You are a prudent woman, Hester; one of the few women strong-minded enough to make a will, and not leave everything afterwards at sixes and sevens,” he said, “for friends and relatives to fight over.”

“I have made a dozen wills in my time. I have never flattered myself I am going to live long,” she replied; “and I am a weak woman, with nothing to live for.”

“ Well, for that matter, what are you going to die for ? ” asked John Woodhatch bluntly.

Miss Brake did not answer at once. She sat there very still, and with her gaze directed into the dark garden. Presently she said—

“ You are in excellent spirits to-night.”

“ I feel in good spirits, as if life were less oppressive,” he replied. “ I feel younger even.”

“ Why is that ? ”

“ I don’t know. There are young people about me in my home,” he said ; “ perhaps that’s it.”

“ Have you seen Lucy Brake lately ? ” asked Hester.

“ Well, yes, I have ; ” and John Woodhatch blushed at the inquiry, and the lady facing him saw he was blushing. “ Why do you ask ? ”

“ I fancied she might be the reason of your wonderful spirits.”

“ Probably,” said Woodhatch thoughtfully. “ She and her father think of joining us in a few days ; I have persuaded them at last.”

“ Oh, I see. And when shall Kate and I make room for them ? ”

“You will both remain, of course,” he answered; “there is plenty of room at the farm. Besides, I want you all here together; I would be surrounded by good friends.”

“Lucy is more strong-minded than I thought, to come to this place,” said Hester Brake; “I admire her courage.”

“The farm has fair associations for her as well as sad,” replied John Woodhatch. “Her husband was happy here and loved her here; and this was home to her.”

“Would you make it a home for her now if she would have you for a second husband, John?” asked Miss Brake unceremoniously.

“Willingly,” he said, looking her in the face as she leaned forward to watch the effect of her bold questioning.

“It is the old love, then, as strong and as foolish as ever!” she said.

“It is the one love of my life. I have not thought to disguise it. I have always told you the exact truth of it.”

“Ah—yes,” said Hester Brake, with a long inward sigh which he did not hear. “And when does she come?”

“Oh, it is not exactly settled; it is

only half a promise," he replied; "soon, I hope."

"Not yet, I hope," whispered Hester Brake almost to herself, although he heard the words and marvelled at them. "Not yet."

CHAPTER II.

WARNING.

JOHN WOODHATCH did not reply in any way to Miss Brake's wish that the coming of Lucy might be delayed. The remark was not intended for his ears, and he was gentleman enough at least to affect that he had not heard it. He wondered a little why Miss Brake should object to the visit of the Larcoms. One of his little plans had been to draw Lucy and Hester Brake together by the common tie of their loss. They were related, too ; there seemed nothing in the world to keep them at arm's length, and presently this ailing, fretful, warm-hearted little woman would need sisterly help and solace. Kitty would be away with her husband at Tolland's Farm then, and Hester Brake would be very much alone.

He had professed to be in good spirits that evening, but her questioning had somewhat disturbed him. She had asked him boldly whether he was still in love with Lucy, and he had replied at once that he was ; but the conversation had not tended to keep up the good spirits of which he had boasted to their abnormal pitch. In his " heart of hearts " he had objected a little to the question ; but Hester Brake was a " privileged " friend who had always known his secret, had even guessed at it shrewdly before the truth came out at the inquest, and the truth was still that he loved the fair, sad young widow, and would have brightened her life if he could. Even by the sacrifice of his own life, if in any way it would have cheered her own, he could have said without much boasting.

" It is getting late," he said restlessly now ; " have you anything more to say, Hester —to ask ? "

" Why ? "

" Why ! " repeated Woodhatch, rising, " because we are early folk at Farm Forlorn, and these are late hours for us."

Miss Brake looked at her watch.

“ Yes—it is getting late,” she said ; “ but there was one subject to which I had intended to allude. You have put it out of my head with your talk of these Larcoms.”

“ Of old Alec—and your sister-in-law,” he said mildly, “ not ‘ these Larcoms ’ exactly. Well, what is it you want to cross-examine me upon ? ”

“ I have no more questions to ask, John. Sit down,” she said, “ I cannot look up at you and shout my wishes.”

“ Oh, they are wishes now—are they ? ” said John lightly. “ Well, five minutes to attend to *them*.”

He sat down by her side, in a second chair that was handy, and she laid her hand upon his arm. The expression of her face was very fixed and earnest, and had strange meanings in it which he could not guess at, he was sure already.

“ John,” she said, “ for many years I have believed you a just man—a man who has suffered from injustice, I might add, and been above resenting it. I don’t think it is in your heart to bear malice, is it ? ”

“ I don’t think it is,” he said smiling,

and endeavouring to regard her preface lightly.
“Who is the party who says I am malicious?”

“No one.”

“Ah! that’s all right,” was his reply.

“But you are unforgiving.”

“Hester, you are laying yourself open to an action for libel; but there, I forgive *you* at any rate.”

“You are unforgiving,” she continued, “and you are aware of it. The man who has injured you, or slighted you, or put a false construction on your actions, you turn against at once. You would do him no harm, but——”

“But I should not be anxious to ask him to dinner, or subscribe to a testimonial for him, or lend him a hundred pounds. Well, no. If he has a bad opinion of me,” he said, shrugging his shoulders, “let him keep it, but at a respectful distance. Why should I seek the company of a man who would treat me vilely if he could, and who, when I was at my best, perhaps, thought the very worst of me? What good is he to me?”

“And you would not forgive him?” said Miss Brake.

“How do you know, Miss Persistency?”

“ And,” she went on, “ I want you to forgive one poor, weak fellow who has sinned against your pride, and is very penitent, I am sure. Whose life your sternness has wrecked already, I am afraid.”

John Woodhatch was quick to seize the motive of all this.

“ You mean Reuben Fladge ? ”

“ Yes.”

“ He was led away by Morris, and talked into playing the spy, but I forgave him on that night, and would have seen to his future had he let me. Had he not grown desperate, and—— ”

“ And killed my brother. That is what you think in your heart,” she said with excitement.

“ Is that not so ? —tell me ! ”

“ So we have come round to the old ghastly subject ? ” said Woodhatch. “ When will you set it aside ? ”

“ Presently. I am a new-comer ; you must bear with me, John, and my associations, conjured up by this farm, for a little while,” she said. “ And now—you think this Fladge killed my brother ? ”

“ I am no man’s judge.”

“ But you suspect him. From the very first you suspected that poor, half-witted lad.”

“ Who tells you this ? ”

“ Fladge himself.”

“ Where have you seen him ? ”

“ No matter, I have seen him,” was the reply. “ More than once I have given him money, and kind words, which he values more than money. And,” she added, “ he did not kill my brother, I am convinced.”

“ I should be glad to be convinced of that too,” muttered Woodhatch.

“ I want you to take my word for it. I, who never in my life deceived you, and whose word you could always trust,” she said. “ Will you do this ? ”

“ Because you take Fladge’s word for it ? ” said the farmer moodily. “ But that is no reason why I should.”

“ Oh, you are terribly obstinate ! ” said Hester ; “ it is your besetting sin ; it will be so to the end. Why can’t you believe what I say ? ”

“ You keep something back from me,” was the sharp reply.

“ For the present, yes ; but,” she added, “ only for the present.”

“ You think you have a clue. Ah, Hester, many shrewder heads than yours have thought so too ! ”

“ Trust me.”

“ Who has been bewildering and exciting you with statements most likely to prove false ? Come, confess,” he urged, “ for you are not often like this.”

“ I will tell you presently.”

“ Not now ? ”

“ Not now.”

“ Then I will forgive Fladge presently, too,” said Woodhatch quietly ; “ when there is any proof in his favour with which a man may grapple.”

“ You drive me to extremes by your doubts,” she cried angrily. “ You will not give me time to prove the truth indisputably ; and I must have time.”

“ I have said some one has disturbed your mind, Hester, for a purpose of his own, knowing how credulous you are. Where is this Fladge ? ” asked John Woodhatch. “ When did you see him last ? ”

“ Don’t ask me any more questions,” she said wearily.

“I will not. I am glad to end the subject, and should be very glad to know it was not Fladge who killed poor Morris. And now, Hester, good night to you.”

“Good night,” she replied, in a low, offended tone, as she rose and walked across the room without looking at him again. She paused before Kate Vanch, and touched her shoulder. The game of draughts was finished, and the betrothed couple were conversing together quietly and confidentially.

“You are the best of friends, I see,” she said lightly. “Come, Kate, I am tired, and need rest to-night.”

Kitty sprang up at once, and Hester Brake placed her hand upon her arm.

“Good night, Greg,” said Kate, with a bright smile at him.

“Good night, Kitty,” he answered as cheerily, as they shook hands together; “and good night, Miss Brake.”

“Yours is certainly like a voice I have heard before,” said Miss Brake, in lieu of her salutation in response. “Where could it have been?”

“I cannot give you any information,” said

Greg smiling ; “ I wish it was in my power.” Then he opened the door for her and Kitty to pass through, bowed again, and closed the door behind them.

He did not return to his place, but walked to the window where John Woodhatch was sitting, pipe in hand, and the tobacco burning away by itself in the bowl.

“ I think I will bid you good night, also, Mr. Woodhatch,” he said ; “ it will have to be early rising to-morrow to see to the seven-acre lot.”

“ Yes ; we must clear it to-morrow, Greg.”

“ It shall be done, sir.”

“ Good night.”

“ Good night, Mr. Woodhatch.”

Greg had expected for the last day or two that the master would have asked him about Kitty Vanch, and of his feelings regarding her, now that she was part and parcel of his life, and a new addition to the home ; but Mr. Woodhatch did not broach the subject. On the contrary, he said, almost sharply——

“ When did you see Fladge last, Greg ? ”

“ Fladge ? ” repeated Greg in surprise.

“ Yes ; I have him on my mind to-night.”

Greg hesitated for an instant.

“ Now you mention it, sir, I am reminded he was seen in the village yesterday.”

“ Who saw him ? ”

“ One of the servants told me this morning she found him at old Spikins’s when she took the beef-tea round,” said Greg.

“ Ah, I see.”

Greg glanced at the farmer, who looked thoughtfully out of doors, and said no more upon the question. Taking this as a hint to go, the favourite pupil withdrew, and John Woodhatch stood up and stretched his arms out, as though the day’s work, or the conversation with Miss Brake, had wearied him very much. He was closing the open window, when a thin, claw-like hand touched his arm, and sought to draw him, as if against his will, into the shadows of the garden, and out of the range of the lights within the room.

“ Master,” said Mrs. Chadderton in a husky whisper, “ it is all found out. You must go away at once.”

CHAPTER III.

THE OLD SUSPICION.

THE master of Farm Forlorn was startled for an instant, then his hand responded to the clutch of the housekeeper, and the position was quickly reversed. By his superior strength, the grasp of his iron fingers which contracted firmly and closely on the fingers of Mrs. Chadderton, he drew that estimable and watchful lady into the room from the dark garden wherein she had been concealed.

“What a bad habit you have of lurking about, Mrs. Chadderton,” he said coolly. “What is the matter with you?”

Mrs. Chadderton, once in the house, was released. She closed the shutters with a quick hand, went to the door of the room, looked into the corridor, and then returned with a feline step to the side of John

Woodhatch. She was deathly white, he saw now, and her slight frame was shaking very violently.

“I have not spoken before ; I have not said a word of this before,” she whispered nervously to him. “Oh, master, my dear old master, who has befriended me so much, and saved so many more deserving, I ask you, beg you, pray to you, to go away from here ! Pray do, for God’s sake, for your own ! Don’t stop another day !”

“Mrs. Chadderton, you are as mad as a March hare, or——”

And then he stooped and looked closely into her face.

“No, I have not been drinking,” said the housekeeper ; “for years I have never touched a drop of drink. You know that.”

“No, you’re sober ; then, old girl, you must be mad,” he said, “or ill, or walking in your sleep.”

“No, no, no,” she answered. “Don’t speak so loudly ; can’t you whisper, so that—so that if anybody was at the door, they could not hear what we were saying ?”

John Woodhatch frowned.

“They may hear anything I have to say, and welcome.”

“Ah, you don’t know,” she cried; “you don’t see, you won’t see how the net is closing round you!”

“Go on,” said the master calmly.

“That woman knows—that hateful woman whom you brought to this house——”

“Hateful. You call her hateful,” said Woodhatch in a tone of stern reproof. “Try and remember.”

“Yes, yes; but I only remember she is your bitterest enemy,” cried the housekeeper; “she is deceiving you and all the rest. Oh, sir, I wouldn’t say so—I would never have said a word, if I were not quite sure. You know me well enough for that, and after all these years of faithful service to you.”

John Woodhatch set down his pipe and rested his two big, brown hands on the shoulders of the woman, generally so quiescent and passive and grim, and now more like a madwoman than ever, as he had told her that she must be.

“Listen to me, Mother Chadderton, will you?”

“I am listening,” she answered; “I will not lose a single word. But, please, don’t speak so loud!”

“You are an old servant, and we have not many secrets from each other,” said John Woodhatch. “You know my life, you think; I know yours, I am sure. And there has been on your mind, then, for five long years, the murder of Morris Brake?”

“Yes.”

“And you think I killed him,” he said; “nay, you are sure I killed him!”

She did not attempt to prevaricate; she looked down, and answered again—

“Yes.”

“And you are still my friend! You do not shrink away from the hands red with blood that hold you to your faith in me, despite it all?” he said wonderingly.

“No, I do not shrink,” she answered boldly. “I saw how he stood in your way, how he had deceived you, robbed you of the one woman who could have blessed your life, and made it all so different! I saw how your heart was wrung—how you suffered.”

“You knew nothing about it. I——”

“Oh, don’t tell me anything ; don’t say a word, but let me save you,” she entreated. “Let me swear you were never away from the house that night, that you were ill, and I attended to you ;—oh ! good God, let me be in some way of help. That is all I want, sir ; nothing more than that.”

“ You don’t blame me, then ? ” he said.

“ Blame you, no. Why should I ? ”

He released his hold of her, and shuddered for an instant.

“ You are a terrible woman, Mrs. Chadderton,” he said, with a laugh that had not much merriment in it ; “ you would screen even a murderer ? ”

“ With all my heart, if that murderer was John Woodhatch.”

“ As you are sure he is.”

She did not answer again ; she wrung her hands together, and looked down, after her old fashion. And he did not repeat his question ; he only regarded her sorrowfully—even very regretfully, and said—

“ Tell me your news. Where is my danger ? ”

Mrs. Chadderton gesticulated wildly.

“She was in the village alone the night before her visit here. She went to the cottages on the low level,” the housekeeper exclaimed.

“Miss Brake.”

“Yes.”

“What did she want?”

“Spikins sent for her,” was the answer.

“How did you learn this?”

“From Reuben Fladge. He has been here to-night,” she went on, speaking with an uncommon rapidity of utterance; “it dawned even upon him there might be danger to the master, and more in it than he had guessed.”

“What did Spikins say to Miss Brake?”

“I don’t know,” she said helplessly.

“Does Fladge?”

“He does not. He was sent out of the cottage,” was the answer; “but the object of the meeting was to tell this woman who killed Morris Brake.”

“You are sure?”

“Quite sure.”

“And Spikins knows who was the murderer?”

“Yes, for certain,” replied Mrs. Chadderton.

“I will go to him,” said John Woodhatch; “it is important I should see that man.”

“You are losing time,” murmured the housekeeper.

“No. I’m gaining it,” said John Woodhatch. “You see it will be more easy to get away from Spikins’s house, Ann Chadderton. There will not be so many to notice which way I have gone.”

“Yes—yes—but——” and then Mrs. Chadderton stopped as John Woodhatch broke into a laugh which sounded very strangely at that hour of the night, and seemed to ring throughout the farm.

“Hush—hush!” she exclaimed; “why are you laughing at me? Where is the fun, at such a time as this?”

“You will not see I am jesting with you,” he said, “and that this murder story has affected you for nothing.”

“Ah, you are beyond me. I do not make you out, master,” she said with a deep sigh. “I would help you at all hazards if I could. I am not thinking of the murder, or caring for it—I only care for your escape.”

“Did Spikins tell Miss Brake I was the murderer?”

“ I do not know,” she said again.

“ Has he ever said to you he thought I was ? ”

“ I have never listened to him. All I know is, he was abroad that night when I sat up for you, and must have seen you,” she said in a lower tone of voice.

“ Seen me on the sands, walking down the great disappointment of my life, Ann Chadderton—nothing more than that. It is strange,” he said, regarding her reproachfully, “ that you should think so badly of me as to set me down as the assassin of a youth who shared my home, and of whom I was proud. I did not kill Morris Brake, woman ; I would rather have killed myself.”

“ They may accuse you all the same,” she answered in a passive tone.

It appeared to be a matter of complete indifference to her whether John Woodhatch had killed Morris Brake or not—it was his safety which concerned this woman, nothing else.

“ Will you believe me ? ” he asked sharply.

“ Yes,” she said at once.

“ And bear in mind, too, that Miss Brake has no suspicion of me.”

“She knows who is the murderer—I heard her say so; and I—I thought she must have meant you, sir, Spikins knowing, and I knowing——”

“Nothing,” said John Woodhatch interrupting her. “See here.”

He drew from his pocket the envelope containing Miss Brake’s will, and held it up before her astonished gaze.

“She has entrusted me with this to-night—probably has left me all her money in it. This is the will of Hester Brake,” he said.

“Indeed?”

“Yes—indeed it is.”

“After all, this may be a trick,” she said very eagerly, “to put you off your guard.”

John Woodhatch stamped his foot, and then broke into a laugh again.

“If you were not a woman I should shake you,” he said bluntly; “but you are a poor creature with only one idea. There go to bed, and leave the outer door on the latch. I may be late.”

“Late, sir?”

“Yes—we are late people sometimes at Farm Forlorn, and prowl at night like wild

beasts. But, then, the farm is a wild beast's den,—to you."

"Forgive me. I have tried to think for the best for many years. Always," she said in a trembling voice again, "what is the best for you, and as a return—my poor return, sir—for all you have done for me."

"There, there—we will not discuss that question over again. You can only show your gratitude," he said, "by speaking well of me."

"That I have always done."

"What!" he exclaimed, "when you thought I had killed poor Morris?"

"That did not matter to me," said Mrs. Chadderton stolidly. "You might have thought it right to kill him, and you would have known so much better than any of us——"

"Good night, Mrs. Chadderton," he said, dryly; "you will want a deal of moral training yet before you are quite fit for the highest society."

"Are you going to Spikins?"

"Yes. If he thinks I did it, he must not slip out of the world with that idea—and if he knows who did," he added with a frown, "he shall tell me as well as Hester Brake."

He locked the will in his safe, an iron cupboard let into the wall, and then strode out of the farm in search of the old man who had had no confidence in John Woodhatch, and so had preferred to trust a woman. A most remarkable man this Spikins, thought the farmer, as he went along his garden, and out of the front gate into the high road, where he took the route which Greg and Hester Brake had taken a few nights ago. He walked very swiftly, being a tall man prone to long strides when business was brisk, or thought was deep with him—and here was one matter to be settled off hand, and at a high pressure.

When should he fairly understand human nature? he thought, as he marched on—when would human nature understand him or award him common justice? To think that this quiet housekeeper of his had set him down as an assassin, and had constituted it her duty in every way to screen him! To fancy “for even a moment” that old Spikins on his dying bed—by way of confession which might have its awful weight with a sceptical world—should have raved out that the master of Farm Forlorn had killed his pupil out of spite! He was

not quite sure what would be the result of that outcry, or how the meshes might close round him, for all the light way in which he had treated it half an hour ago. But he could not think for long that Spikins and Miss Brake distrusted him. It was not likely, it was not natural; but it was necessary to know what this poor old dotard had upon his mind—the little mind which old age had left to him.

He reached the rough hewn path leading into the darkness of the lower ground, and plunged into the shadows without a moment's thought and at the same quick pace. To his surprise there were figures flitting in the darkness, men and women chattering there as if it were mid-day, and trotting to and fro, a few of them.

“Mister Woodhatch—is that you, sir?” came an inquiry at last in the broad provincial accent, “ye have heard the news, then, sir, a’ready?”

“What news?”

“He’s gone at last, poor soul!”

“Spikins?”

“Yes, sir. He went off like the snuff of a

candle," said the man in the dark, "all of a sudden like, just as Reuben was feeding him with a tea-spoon and a hollerin' at him for biting it. Well," was the remark, "he's had a good innings and can't complain where he's a gone to."

"No. He cannot complain," said Woodhatch; then he walked to the last cottage, pushed open the door, and joined a group of sight-seers who were already there staring down at the still white figure in the bed,—more dignified in death than it had ever been in life.

"He's gone, sir," said Fladge, who had been at the bed's foot, "and he won't want me ever again."

And without another word, and with a half wistful, half frightened look at the old master, who had scared him by his sudden presence there, Fladge attempted to walk past and drift into the night away from him.

But the strong hand of the master caught him by the wrist, and a voice less stern and hard than he had expected fell upon his ears.

"Stay, Fladge. I want you!" said John Woodhatch.

CHAPTER IV.

THE VISITORS.

A FEW days after the death of Peter Spikins, whose sudden departure from this vale of tears was pronounced to be an especial "mercy"—particularly by those retainers of John Woodhatch who had had the privilege to attend to him, "turn and turn about,"—Alexander Larcom and his daughter Lucy arrived at Farm Forlorn.

It was close upon five years since they had visited the place, but the farmer's perseverance—his pertinacity—had brought them once more within the farmhouse walls. Lucy Brake had given way at last and consented to accompany her father, although this had occurred probably not so much for John Woodhatch's sake as on account of a letter received from Hester Brake asking her to

come, and begging that she would not delay her visit as she was anxious to make friends with her.

“Ours was not a happy meeting, and I would make amends for it,” Hester Brake wrote frankly, and thus disarmed her young sister-in-law at once.

“After all, she is Morris’s sister, and he would have been glad to see us friends,” said Lucy to her father; “let us go.”

Before the week was out they were located at their old quarters; the ice was broken, and the new home circle at Farm Forlorn was quite complete. And the woman who one night had whispered to herself “Not yet, I hope,” when told by John Woodhatch of the possibility of Lucy’s visit, was the first to welcome her, and appear very glad to see her.

“I was afraid you would never come—or that you would come too late,” said Hester Brake.

“Too late—for what?”

“To believe in me.”

John Woodhatch shrugged his shoulders as he walked away. He had heard Hester Brake’s enigmatic answer.

"Of a surety, I shall never comprehend these women," he soliloquized as he crossed the fields after the interview, "what makes them such 'kittle cattle,' I wonder."

Had he listened more, he would have had less to be perplexed at, for Hester Brake explained the position satisfactorily enough to Lucy—if after her eccentric fashion.

"I have so many things to talk to you about—and I may not have much time before me," she said, "see how thin that hand is!"

She held it up towards the sun for her sister-in-law's inspection.

"I am not going to live very long," Hester added; "and, after all, it is better for me."

"You must not think that," said Lucy, "you are young still—comparatively."

"Compared with poor old Spikins who died last week—oh yes!" she said, sharply, "but, then, I have not the constitution of old Spikins. We Brakes die early."

"Oh!" exclaimed Lucy, as though an arrow had struck her.

"I beg pardon, I talk at random," said

Hester hastily. "See what an inconsiderate woman I am, and always in the wrong. Where is Mr. Larcom?"

Lucy looked hard at her, remembering the past suspicions of her father, and Miss Brake said more hastily still—

"I wish to ask his pardon for the one suspicion I have had of him. You know."

"Yes," answered Lucy, "I have not forgotten."

"I was in the wrong. And," she added, "I have never been backward in confessing my errors. Ask Kate Vanch—ask John Woodhatch, if I am."

"I am only too glad to take your own word for it," said Lucy, a new friend on the instant, and for the first time in her life she stooped and kissed Miss Brake in gratitude for the *amende honorable* which had been made to her. Then she tripped away with a brighter look upon her face, and went in search of Morice, who it need hardly be said was also a guest at Farm Forlorn, and who had already found out her old companion of the sands, Kitty Vanch, and was romping with her in all the exuberance of happy childhood.

Lucy felt her heart sink a little at the sight of them—as she had done by the sea-shore—for there was only this child to live for, she thought, in her morbid devotion to her, and what if it should happen that some day Morice should love some one better than herself? when Morice grew up even—why it would break her heart!

“ You are fond of children, Miss Vanch,” said Lucy, as she approached them; “ I think you told me so when I first met you? ”

“ Yes—I dare say I did,” answered Kitty; “ and this child would be so bright if she had more companions of her own age, probably.”

“ Morice does not want any more companions,” said Lucy; “ she is contented with her mother.”

“ Yes—of course; but, then, the mother should not be quite all in all—should she, Mrs. Brake? ” said Kitty, thoughtfully, “ for the mother might die, or be separated from her in some way, or—but there, I don’t know, I can’t say. I have no remembrance of a mother ever looking down upon me, as you look at her.”

“Poor girl!” and Lucy’s hand stole out and touched Kate’s in sympathy.

“And *your* mother, madam?”

“She died when I was a baby. I never saw her; I cannot imagine what she was like,” said Lucy.

Kate Vanch seemed strangely drawn to this beautiful, almost desolate, young woman; indeed, there were many reasons why she should feel attracted by her, and was solicitous to gain her friendship. She had heard so much of Lucy Brake, and knew so much more than Lucy would have given her credit for knowing.

“I hope we may be friends, some day,” said Kitty frankly; “and that when Greg and I are married, you will not keep entirely away from us.”

“Would you really care to see me?” asked Lucy.

“Yes—indeed I would. I have thought I should like to be a humble but true friend of yours,” said Kitty. “Even before I had seen you, I used to think so.”

“Indeed,” said Lucy, interested and astonished. “And how was that?”

"I had heard you were so pretty, and good, and clever."

"From Morris?" came the eager question now.

"Oh no! You were secretly married, and he did not mention you to his sister," said Kitty; "it was from Mr. Woodhatch, of course."

"Ah! yes, yes; I had forgotten John," said Kitty.

"Forgotten him!" cried Kitty.

"Did he speak of me so much, then, years ago?" asked Lucy, looking sadly on the ground.

"He spoke of little else," said Kate frankly; "and, of course, I knew—everybody knew."

"Mine has been a profitless life, and has troubled others a great deal," said Lucy more coldly; "and you must not speak of this again."

"I beg your pardon, if I have said anything to pain you."

"It is granted, and readily."

"I—I have a bad habit of speaking out, of saying what is in my thoughts," Kitty

explained ; " and your coming has made me more abrupt than usual in my speech. And perhaps I have not improved lately, as Greg is something like me in that way."

" Greg is frank, then ? "

" He has not a secret from me in the world."

" That is very good of him. I admire perfect confidence."

" Part of this habit of speaking out we have both learned from the master. That is it, I suppose," said Kitty, after a moment's reflection ; " he is our model, and we copy him."

" Does he teach you to talk in this way, and about himself ? "

" Oh no," said Kitty, colouring ; " but you—you do not mind my mentioning his name to you. You cannot hate him, surely."

" I have a great respect for him. He is my father's friend, and mine, and I should be glad to see him happy ; and," she added, after a moment's pause, " that is all. Come, Morice dear, bid Miss Vanch good-bye for the present."

" Dood-bye," said Morice, holding up her

rosebud mouth to be kissed by her new friend ; and then mother and child strolled away, and Kate Vanch stood looking after Lucy Brake.

“ How pretty she is,” she murmured ; “ how young and fair, and unlike everybody else at Skegs Shore. Why did not my steady old faithful Greg fall in love with her, and forget me altogether ? What would Kitty Vance have done then, I wonder ! ”

CHAPTER V.

BECOMING FRIENDS.

THE superficial observer—that very indefinite character with which no one in particular cares to be identified,—would have surmised at this period there was a happy family at Farm Forlorn. Here at least, he would have thought, had assembled those whom past doubts and dislikes had set apart for awhile, and who, under the hospitable roof of John Woodhatch and influenced by his kindness, had shaken hands, and set the bygones for ever aside. Here was the new life fitting to the new times; a brand new era of perfect confidence, a fair landscape stretching out in the present, a fairer prospect for the future, and the sun coming up over the great grey hills, which yesterday had been like eternal barriers in the paths of these folk now sitting side by side, with smiles

upon their faces. The superficial observer would have gone on his way marvelling at the felicity of Farm Forlorn, and noting not a sign of the great upheaval to come—of the conflicting forces armed to the teeth marching silently onward to do battle in these green fields and wreck the peace of many.

Yes, this was the calm before the storm, not perfect peace as Woodhatch the dreamer had thought it was. Miss Brake was quiet and grave, with her past peevishness no longer evident, a model visitor whom nothing disturbed, and who apologized for the trouble that she was to everybody, and seemed to regard even Mrs. Chadderton as a humble friend whom she might presently love very much. She sat in her big arm-chair, and smiled, if a little sadly, at all visitors, saying but few words, and watching every one with an interest that was remarkably flattering. If there were one person more than another to whom she showed an extra amount of respect now, it was the Reverend Alexander Larcom, making amends thereby as it seemed, and as it really was, for her past ungenerous suspicions of him.

“I have been in the wrong. I am a woman very often in the wrong,” she confessed on the first occasion of addressing him under John Woodhatch’s roof; “but you are a Christian minister and will forgive the hard thoughts I have had, the hard words I sent you by my brother’s widow.”

“Ye sent them in no hurry either, Hester Brake,” he said dryly, and with his shaggy eyebrows lowering a little over his deep-set eyes, “and ye had five years to pick and choose them.”

“Yes, I know,” she answered. “But the story seemed to fit in with my doubts—it seemed so probable you should kill him.”

“I am obligeed to ye for the notion.”

“You had discovered Morris and Lucy together, the thought of their secret marriage might not have occurred to you—you saw a woman deceived and an honest home dis-honoured, and you struck him down in a mad fury. That is how it seemed to me. Forgive me, old friend, of whom I should have had more charitable thoughts,” she added, “remembering your past kindness to me.”

“And ye have changed yeer mind aboot me now?”

“Yes—completely,” she said, “am I forgiven?”

“Wa’al, yes,” he replied, “why not? Ye were always a poor, flighty thing, I’m fancying, darting like a lapwing to conclusions, and I was not much deesturbed by yeer suspicions. ‘She’ll think somebody else killed Morris preesently,’ I said, ‘and she’ll forget her doubts o’ me.’ And so it is.”

“Yes. So it is.”

“And if ye’ll take a sensibeel friend’s advice, Hester,” he said, “ye’ll not bother any more aboot the matter. It’s kept ye down too long—it’s made ye ill too often.”

“It has killed me, Mr. Larcom.”

“Ye were vary fond of that brother o’ yours, though I did not see much in him myself but a fly-away style like yeer own,” said the parson, “and ye spoiled him.”

“I loved him for his good qualities—I knew he would grow out of the bad, and if time was not denied him,” she said with a sigh, “and he——”

“Ye—es, preceesely;” and then Alexander

Larcom walked away from the maiden lady, tired of this one subject, or extremely anxious to avoid it. Still he was glad in his heart that she had professed her regret for doubting him; —he hated people doubting him, his mission being, as he thought, to gather love and confidence around him, to preach and pray and do his best for poor humanity. To have been, even in this weak woman's mind, an object of distrust had wounded his feelings—and clashed with the very good opinion he had always had of himself, for that matter. Still Hester Brake was a poor, eccentric creature, and she had been as sorely tried as his own Lucy.

And Lucy Brake, who had been a fortnight now at Farm Forlorn, and was one of this new and happy family? She had surely benefited by the change from the little cottage in the high road to the spacious rooms of the big old farmhouse—to the great garden and the broad meadows lying beyond. The association had been painful rather than pleasurable to begin with, but this she was prepared for, and after all her happiest times had been within these walls; here she had learned to love Morris,

and Morris to love her ; here had been wild impulsive romance, leaping forward blindly and without much regard to consequences, but still a romance, pure and ardent and full of the deep joys of life,—a girl and boy's love, perhaps, but whilst it lasted like no other happiness on God's earth. It was all ended ; but there were sweet thoughts amongst the ruins, fair flowers amongst the tares, and after a while the shadows did not fall so darkly across her path, and even to think of Morris became a peaceful retrospect.

Then, again, here was life for Lucy Brake, we have said, and a new affection growing very rapidly and remarkably, she thought herself, for Kitty Vanch. That she could hardly understand, but there it was, and she did not attempt to resist it, or to reason with it, or to account for it. She was romantic still, poor Lucy, and thought it remarkable and fateful in its way, when it was simply a very commonplace proceeding, the natural outcome of a loving nature, the instinct for affection in some shape or way, the craving to be loved, which every woman has, and a few men, perhaps, with hearts upon their sleeves.

It was strange that these two young women should approach each other, the elder knowing little of life, and the younger a scarred warrior after life's battles with poverty and crime—but both women in earnest, who had known great trouble and had had few friends, and both grateful for affection, and in themselves affectionate. Lucy Brake could not account for it, we have said, but it was flattering to know that Kitty Vanch began to look up to her, to regard her as a friend above her in position, character, mental capacity, and to show by various little ways that she was proud to be noticed. There was certainly a strange and deep interest in her evinced by Kitty Vanch, as if some hidden motive were at the bottom of it, drawing Kitty towards her, almost, Lucy could imagine—being highly imaginative—against her will, against even the wishes of others, she was inclined to fancy sometimes. And in return for this Lucy Brake found it easy to love Kitty Vanch. There was something original about the girl, she was so frank and open and fearless, her dark eyes looked so earnestly, sometimes so sadly at her, and in all her life Lucy had received such little

sympathy, she thought,—village beauty, and something more than a village beauty, though she was. Lucy had never become in any way attached to a female friend of her own age—Mr. Larcom had not encouraged female friendships, at any time, it may be said—and Kitty's life, away from Bolter's Rents, had been spent with an eccentric, fretful, if warm-hearted invalid. Hence after awhile, and without taking the Fates into consideration, these two young women were drawn together, and even little Morice became a link between them, despite Lucy's experiencing occasionally a jealous pang when Kitty's brightness won too many smiles from little Morice.

Add to all this, Lucy's knowledge that Greg Dorward was to be Kitty's husband, and that Greg Dorward had spoken only a few weeks back of his deep love for herself, and one need not be surprised at Lucy Brake's interest in her new friend. Lucy was somewhat perplexed, and hardly able to reconcile Gregory Dorward's present manner with that of their last meeting on the high-road and his words of love and passion. At times, she wished she had not promised to keep his secret—it

was so like treachery to the unsuspecting Kitty, who was deserving of a true affection, and not a make-believe love to oblige John Woodhatch, farmer. And whether Greg Dorward would make Kitty a good husband was even a matter of grave doubt to her, Greg being clever and ambitious, and surely not loving Kate Vanch very deeply yet,—trying to love her even as he had confessed to Lucy, and as a mere matter of obedience to the patron who had insisted on the match.

Still Kate Vanch was happy and Greg Dorward was content. Perhaps Greg had only fancied he was in love with *her*, thought Lucy very humbly, and while Kate Vanch was away from him; he was only polite to her now, as became him, or very much on guard; and he seemed to encourage, rather than to dislike, the growing friendship between her and his *fiancée*.

“I am very pleased to see you two together, Mrs. Brake,” Greg had said on one occasion; “you and she true friends, may be some day of service to each other.”

“I don’t see how that can be,” said Lucy inquiringly.

"Oh! and I cannot explain," he replied; "but sometimes I think you may. Life changes rapidly, and you two have been all *my* life, as it were."

"But——"

"You in the past," he said in a low voice; "the past that is dead, and she in the present, which exists for her and me. Do you understand?"

"Hardly," she replied; "but the past *is* dead?"

"Yes," he responded.

"And you love Kitty Vanch truly—and as she deserves to be loved?"

"Is she not going to be my wife?" he rejoined.

"That is not an answer."

"Yes, then, I love Kitty; but it is a very different kind of——"

"Spare me," said Lucy quickly. "I know what you are going to say, and it must be left unsaid for all our sakes; for Kitty's most of all."

"I can trust you."

"With your past secret," she answered. "Do not trouble me with any new ones, for I will not promise to keep them."

“I am silent,” answered Greg.

“And women cannot keep a secret.”

“I do not believe that,” said Greg; “I would trust a woman, rather than a man, in a great affliction.”

“You would trust John Woodhatch?”

Greg Dorward shuddered strangely, and Lucy Brake remarked this.

“There are troubles which no man could share with Mr. Woodhatch,” Greg answered moodily; “he could never sympathize with them. Some women might, I fancy.”

“You talk as if you had all the troubles of the world upon your shoulders, Greg,” said Lucy, “instead of the world opening out before you, bright with colour.”

“I am in a moody fit to-night,” he said, with a forced laugh. “I feel as if something were going to happen to me.”

“Here is Kitty to cheer you,” she said, as Kate came into the room, looked towards them, and advanced in their direction.

“We were talking of you, Kate,” said Lucy, as she approached.

“That’s right. I should be jealous, I dare say, if you talked only of yourselves,” she answered, frankly.

“Jealous of me?” asked the young widow a little later on, and in allusion to Kitty’s last remark; “never of me, I hope; that is not likely.”

“Likely that you should love my Greg,” said Kitty, laughing. “Well, I cannot imagine that happening.”

“No,” replied Lucy Brake; “it is impossible.”

CHAPTER VI.

JEALOUS.

THERE were two inmates of Farm Forlorn, very probably three, who did not regard the growing friendship between Lucy Brake and Kitty with any great amount of favour. Hester Brake hardly seemed to care for it, although apathetic and generally amiable; and John Woodhatch felt that his calculations for the future were a little disturbed by this unlooked-for incident. He had not thought of the result of bringing these two young women together, or of a sisterly love springing up between them; their characters were dissimilar, their lives were likely to be always apart, and he had not given a thought to them as friends. He had wished to interest Lucy in Hester Brake, and Hester in Lucy; he

had planned and plotted to bring them together, and with a kindly forethought as to the time when Kitty should be married, and the mistress left alone, requiring some earnest, kindly companion at her side in Kitty's place. Who more fitting than the sister-in-law, from whom Hester Brake had held aloof till now, and had indeed never seemed to like?

"Had it not been for her, Morris would be alive," Hester Brake had said two years ago to John Woodhatch; and, although the invalid lady was inclined to regard Lucy with less asperity, to judge her character more truly, to remember she was Morris's widow, and still mourning for him, it was a little vexatious to find that Lucy preferred Kitty's company, and, though respecting Hester now, made but very little advances towards an intimate acquaintance with her.

"It will come in time," soliloquized John Woodhatch philosophically; "when Kitty is married, and these two are drawn together more."

The marriage day was fixed at last. Four weeks hence from the time of which we speak. It had been appointed by John Woodhatch,

and neither Greg nor Kitty had a word to say against it.

“The farm at Bleathorpe will be quite ready by that time, Greg,” said John Woodhatch; “meanwhile I have put an old friend in to mind it for you.”

“An old friend!” repeated Greg wonderingly.

“Yes; Reuben Fladge,” said Woodhatch, “who has turned over a new leaf; at least, he says so, and I am disposed to believe him.”

“You trust him again, sir,” said Greg, “and after all?”

“Yes.”

“That is singular.”

“What is singular?” was the sharp inquiry.

“That you should. I understood—I have heard—I did not think,” stammered Greg Dorward, “you could ever put faith again in the man or woman who had once deceived you.”

“Who told you so?”

“I cannot remember; yourself, I think.”

Mr. Woodhatch frowned a little. Possibly he had said so in the old days, in order to

keep Greg Dorward up to the mark, and thinking his creed was true enough at that time ; but it did not please him now to be reminded of it. Had not that rule of his—if it had been his, he added, with a reserve—led on, by a strange chain of events, to the death of Morris Brake ? Who should say it had not ?

“ Faith is a strong word, Greg,” he answered at last ; “ and, at all events, try and remember this. I have learned to forgive—to believe in man’s repentance.”

He walked away after this ; he seemed afraid of more questions from Greg Dorward. Presently Greg rode out on horseback, and went at a tolerably swift pace to Bleathorpe, to see Fladge for himself, probably to congratulate him on being once more reinstated in the favour of John Woodhatch, more probably still to ask a few questions of that young gentleman, Greg being of a curious turn of mind, and conscious that all was not as fair sailing at Farm Forlorn as the calm aspect of surrounding things, and the serenity of the master, might seem to warrant at first sight.

Lucy Brake, from the garden of Farm Forlorn, had seen Greg ride away, bidding farewell to Kitty before he mounted his horse; and Hester Brake had stood at the open window of the farm parlour, also watching them with interest. When Greg had departed, the invalid came slowly into the sunshine, and separated, as it were, Kitty from Lucy, by entrusting Kitty with her keys, and giving her some lengthy instructions as to the arrangement of her wardrobe.

Lucy Brake suspected there was a reason for this, and was not surprised when Hester said presently—

“I have sent Kitty away, because I have something to say to you this morning which I don’t want any one else to hear.”

“Is it so very important?” asked Lucy.

“I think it is. Let little Morice leave us, please; the child fidgets me this morning.”

Lucy regarded the fretful woman dubiously. Was the incident of the meeting on the sands to be repeated? Were hard words and new suspicions to be the order of this day? For who could tell what strange topics Hester Brake might broach, having had so much

time to brood on the mysteries about her, and being a mystery in herself?

“ You need not be afraid of me,” said Hester, accurately reading the expression on the fair face confronting hers. “ I want to speak to you for a little while concerning Kitty. That is why I sent her away.”

Lucy let little Morice trip off after this, and Hester Brake put her arm within that of her sister-in-law’s.

“ I am restless to-day; ill, perhaps. Let us walk up and down the lawn for a while, until I am tired; or,” she added, “ you are tired of me.”

“ Will this not over-fatigue you? ”

“ You are very kind to be thus considerate,” said the elder woman, with a spice of her old acerbity; “ but I can bear more fatigue than you imagine. And now to business.”

This did not sound like a pleasant beginning, but Lucy was patient and deferential to her senior. She did not believe it was in Miss Brake’s power to disturb her equanimity; she imagined she had learned to know Miss Brake a little better, and to make more allowance for her eccentricities. And certainly

Miss Brake *was* eccentric, and with an awkward habit of taking people unawares.

“ You will not be astonished to learn I am a jealous woman,” Hester Brake commenced; “ I acknowledge that myself; and I am jealous of Kitty’s growing affection for you.”

“ Oh, Miss Brake, I hope not. You are surely not so childish as this.”

“ I think I am. Pity me, if you think it childish; but I cannot help it, being weak and vain, as you are, Lucy—as we women all are, for that matter,” she said. “ You see I am not speaking angrily, or dictatorially; only in all confidence—sisterly confidence, if you will allow me to say as much.”

“ Am I doing harm in being one more friend to Kitty Vanch ?

“ Be a friend to her when I am gone, Lucy, and when she will need one most,” was the reply; “ not before.”

“ I cannot treat her coldly.”

“ I do not ask you.”

“ I am interested in her; drawn towards her by her interest in me. Do you think that wrong ? ” asked Lucy.

“ My dear, sometimes I think I don’t know

right from wrong," said Hester; "the whirl of the world confuses me; and, God help me, I have much to think about."

"I am sorry for that—sorry to think you allow your mind to be disturbed by little matters, which other folk would set aside or smile away."

"As in this instance, you mean?"

"Yes, in this instance," answered Lucy Brake.

"It is not a little matter," said Hester; "for five years I have had Kitty Vanch under my care—for more than five years, I may say. I have been interested in her progress; I have, after my own fashion, helped to train her, brought her, as it were, from darkness into day; and you must not step between us. As I have intimated before, you must wait until I am dead."

"You speak as if I were a rival, or an enemy," Lucy replied; "as if I could not love her with yourself, and share her love with you. And you forget?"

"What do I forget?"

"That she is engaged to Greg Dorward."

"I can think of little else, save that. That

is a worse trouble than the thought of her liking you better than me," said Hester.

"Ah, Miss Hester, I think such troubles as these might be easily set aside, if you would only try," said Lucy very gently.

"Shall I tell you something more?" asked Miss Brake quickly in reply.

Lucy could scarcely repress a shudder. She was afraid of her sister-in-law's confidences, and what might follow them.

"If it is necessary—if you think it is necessary," she added.

Hester Brake looked round cautiously, as if afraid of listeners, or suspicious that Mrs. Chadderton might, after a fashion of hers, be lurking in the background, and then said, in a low voice—

"Kitty Vanch will never marry Gregory Dorward."

CHAPTER VII.

A PROMISE.

LUCY BRAKE was astonished, but credulous. She had begun to regard Morris's sister as scarcely a wise woman; rather a woman who had strange fancies, and was remarkably suspicious, and never twice the same. Was it possible that she was sane—quite sane, that is? Might not the past affliction which had nearly crushed herself, thought Lucy, allied to the natural weakness of Miss Brake's constitution, have wrecked her more completely? If Hester were really mad, and had up to this time, and with a madwoman's cunning, carefully disguised it, what was to be done?

“Not marry Greg?” Lucy repeated.

“I would rather see her in her coffin; it would be better she should lie there than in his arms,” exclaimed Hester passionately.

“Why should you think this?” asked Lucy; “pray compose yourself.”

“I am *not* raving, Lucy,” was the answer, “and do not need to be composed.”

How quickly Hester Brake read people’s suspicions of her, was Lucy’s next thought, before she said—

“You naturally surprised me. Why will not Kitty marry Greg?”

“Why?” repeated Miss Brake, like a woman anxious to gain time before she answered.

“Yes,” said Lucy, again, “why?”

“Because—he does not love her,” she added.

“What makes you think so?”

“Because he loves you.”

Lucy took a deep, long breath. Yes, an acute woman indeed, as well as a suspicious one, this Hester Brake. How could she have guessed a secret which she had promised Greg to keep for him, which Lucy had thought only Greg and herself could possibly have known?

“I have seen this very clearly. I have watched his every look since you came here.”

Lucy did not reply.

“ You do not deny this, Lucy ? ” continued Hester Brake, after a moment’s silence. “ Where is the virtuous indignation which should follow such a charge as mine ? ”

“ You do not charge me with loving him ? ”

“ Do you ? ” asked Hester.

“ No. God forbid.”

“ God be thanked,” corrected Hester Brake, “ for I do not like this man. I am afraid of him—I do not in any way believe in him.”

“ He is honest and straightforward and energetic—he will make Kitty a good husband—he——”

“ Have I not said he will never marry Kate Vanch ? ” said Hester Brake sharply. “ Do you think I have no will of my own—no power to stop it—no power to make you assist me to stop it ? I tell you that I have ! ”

“ Whether you have or not,” said Lucy, in the calm, clear tones which despite of Hester’s vehemence seemed to exercise some influence over her listener, “ you will have to consider whether it is a wise step to part them.”

“ He does not care for her.”

“ I am not sure of that.”

“And finding it out afterwards—oh, the terrible afterwards to us women!—would be to kill her possibly. You must warn her, Lucy, and let her act for herself.”

“No, no!” cried Lucy quickly, “I will not do that. Greg does not love me—there was a foolish, fleeting fancy once, and that was all. I will not be the one to disturb a woman’s confidence in her lover.”

“You would prefer her being deceived.”

“I believe it would be as well,” said Lucy thoughtfully.

“You are romantic still, poor child,” replied her sister-in-law; “but you are terribly selfish, for all that. You thrust a task upon myself it is beyond my strength to bear.”

“You would never act so cruelly.”

“So mercifully would be a better word,” said Miss Brake taking her hand from Lucy’s arm, withdrawing it even in anger from her, “for this will be a mercy.”

She walked slowly towards the house, with Lucy keeping step by her side, not liking to leave her in her present mood, and with that look of set determination on her face. It presaged too much—it might mean more trouble

than any one could foresee, than this miserable and envious woman could imagine, thought Lucy indignantly again.

“ You will do nothing in haste, Hester,” she said, “ if I may call you Hester now. It is so easy to do harm—so hard to stay its effects when done.”

“ I know it without your preaching—which you might leave to your father. It’s his business,” Hester answered. “ I am aware I am not an amiable woman who can soften a blow. You can.”

“ Why should it be told to Kitty at all ? ”

“ Let her marry the man knowing the truth. I detest deception more than you do. I have never practised it as you have.”

“ Miss Brake ! ”

“ You deceived your father when you married my brother secretly, did you not ? ” Hester asked.

“ Ah, madam, you might have spared me that reproach ! ” cried Lucy, “ it is late in the day to stab me. And I loved your brother so truly ! ”

“ Too truly,” muttered Hester, “ but I am fighting hard to-day not to think of Morris.”

“And to thwart John Woodhatch.”

“He will be sure of the wisdom of this presently. I,” she added, taking Lucy’s arm, “will answer for him.”

“Hester,” said Lucy suddenly, “I will tell Kitty.”

“When?”

“Before the day is out, if you will promise to be silent.”

“I promise. More, I am grateful to you, Lucy, for your offer.”

When they were at the open window of the front parlour, she stopped again, and said—

“You see now, Lucy, why I did not wish Kitty Vanch to think too much of you. She will go back with me to my house needing all my affection. She will begin a new life side by side with me. That is,” she added, “if I live. If I die then take care of her in God’s name. I have arranged for that.”

“But is it probable that anything I can say will part her from Greg after all? Will she be not likely to forgive him?” asked Lucy. “Is it not more than probable she will?”

Miss Brake looked at her steadily.

“Yes, it is,” she answered.

“Therefore what reason——”

“Leave the rest to me. I have your promise, Lucy Brake,” was the reply.

CHAPTER VIII.

ON THE HIGH-ROAD.

YES, she had her promise, thought Lucy, as her eccentric sister-in-law passed out of her sight, but it was a different promise from that which Hester thought she had exacted. If Hester Brake preferred to speak in riddles, so did she: if the elder would not be frank with her, and only drop mysterious hints and make dire threats, it must be her own mission, thought Lucy, and in her woman's way, to foil her. For it had come to foiling Hester Brake, if possible—almost to distrusting her and the motives which might be lurking in the depths of her secretive nature.

She wanted Kitty to herself, and did not wish to part with her. She had taken a dislike to Greg Dorward, just as she had once taken a dislike to her; and she had been keen and

watchful enough to learn a secret, and to surprise Lucy by its sudden revelation. For her own selfish ends, it seemed possible, Hester would plot to bring about the separation of these lovers—for they were lovers now—and Lucy, full of sympathy with them, and interest in them, would do her best to stop this. Heaven knows there was not so much happiness in life that one should seek to mar it by a word; and in her warm, generous impulse Lucy shrank with horror from the thought of dashing down one hope of Kitty Vanch's. She would tell her the truth, but in a way that she believed would not affect Kate very much; and at least it would spare her Hester Brake's construction of the facts. And she would tell Greg Dorward first what had been resolved upon, and ask his advice concerning it, and his permission to speak to Kitty in her own gentle way.

Here was a new incentive to life, and she set about her task without much fear, and with considerable faith in the result. There was something to do, and a new incentive to be active, and Lucy after a while felt lighter and yet stronger for the cause she had resolved to

espouse. What Hester Brake might think of her presently for siding with the young couple whom she had wished to separate did not affect her greatly; Lucy had made up her mind if not to dislike Hester Brake to be distrustful of her—and at the very best only to pity her. To wish to part Greg and Kitty, because she thought Greg loved another—which Lucy did not know herself for certain now—was too hard and cruel a task for the parson's daughter. She believed in these two and their future, and she had listened to Kitty's rhapsody concerning Greg and her life to come with him, until her own heart—still young and not free from romance—had opened at the other's frankness and taken warmth and hope from hers.

Lucy did not trust herself with Kitty yet awhile. In the afternoon she and little Morice strolled along the quiet country road towards Bleathorpe village in order to meet Greg Dorward and tell him what had occurred. After all, he might refuse her permission, or think it would be better to tell Kitty for himself, and Lucy's word had been pledged to Greg first. And after all and in any way it would not

matter a great deal—it was a “fuss about nothing,” she said smiling to herself, and with no small confidence in her own powers of setting this little matter in its proper light.

Lucy had well calculated time and distance; about three miles from the farm, and where she had thought she might encounter Greg on his homeward journey—if he were anxious to meet them all at the tea-table—he came trotting rapidly along the road. He did not see them both till he was close upon them, he was so deep in thought—and thought that was grave enough to furrow his brow and give a dark and angry look to his face—but at a first glimpse of Lucy he raised his hat and sprang from his horse.

“I did not expect to see you, Mrs. Brake,” he said with his face aglow with smiles now, “you are taking a long walk with Morice. Is it not too far for her?”

“She is a good walker. And I wanted to meet you at a fair distance from the farm,” answered Lucy.

“Indeed,” said Greg, with one of his quick glances by which he essayed to read the facts confronting him, and which had been as patent

to Bolter's Rents and "Fretwell's" as to the new existence at Skegs Shore, "what has happened?"

He associated her presence with some disaster at once; it was his nature perhaps, and he was full of forebodings like the rest of them, and doubted the dead calmness which reigned at Farm Forlorn.

"Are you strong enough to bear a little trouble, Greg?"

"I am always prepared for it," was the answer, and in so deep, and even mournful a tone that Lucy regarded him wonderingly. He noted her look and said—

"I do not believe this peace *can* last. It does not seem to fit in with my life, with Kitty's—or anybody's here."

"I am sorry to add unpleasant news, Greg, to your present frame of mind; but walk a little way with me whilst I tell you all," she said.

"Morice?" he said interrogatively.

"She is not listening. She will not take any notice."

"Very well."

They walked on side by side, Greg's hand

upon the bridle of his horse. People might have thought them lovers, had they chanced to pass that way, they spoke in such faint tones, and he bent his head so low to hear her story. He was very attentive, and did not interrupt her by a word; and once or twice he glanced at little Morice to notice if she were listening too, or was likely to comprehend the explanation which the young mother offered of the incidents of the morning.

“I thought it was only fair I should tell you all this, and warn you,” said Lucy in conclusion.

“Thank you,” he answered. “I did not think I had so true a friend. I am very deeply obliged to you, Mrs. Brake, for putting me on guard against an enemy.”

“She is hardly an enemy,” said Lucy. “She is thinking probably more of Kitty than yourself; and her disposition is so variable that she may become your friend, and take your part even, before your marriage day.”

“Very probably,” answered Greg Dorward; “for I do not consider Miss Brake responsible

for all she says and does. You will forgive me if I pain you by this opinion ; but it is mine. I think it is the master's."

"I hope it is wrong," said Lucy, not telling him that her own opinion at times almost coincided with his own. "And now, will you trust Kitty to me to relate this story of a foolish fancy, as I have promised Miss Brake I would ? "

"Kitty is strange. How will she receive such a story from you ? How will you tell it ? " he inquired.

"Cannot you trust me ? "

"With my life."

She would not notice his impetuosity, but continued very calmly—

"I can assure her honestly that never in my life have I thought of you with any affection"—he shrugged his shoulders at this—"save the respect of one friend for another," she added ; "that I was glad to hear of the engagement between her and you, and thought it was best for both ; that you have had a boy's fancy, a boy's folly, whilst away from her, and it is ended now completely ; that you are looking forward to the future with her

as to no other future which could give you happiness."

Greg listened as patiently as he had done to her story of Miss Brake's interposition.

"Yes," he said listlessly; "tell her that, if you like."

"And as the truth?"

"Heaven knows what is the truth," he said in a deeper tone; "neither you nor I, Lucy Brake, as yet."

"But—"

"Tell her what you please. I think with you, it is better in your hands. Say all you can to make this a light and pleasant jest, and to spare her. I shouldn't like," he added thoughtfully, "to make *her* unhappy; she's too good and honest for that. And yet—"

"And yet—what?" asked Lucy, as he came to a full stop.

"How will she receive your version of the matter? She is not like you, or any other woman, but herself. She will think with me, perhaps," he added gloomily, "that this is the beginning of the end."

"I do not understand you now, Greg."

“No. Better, Lucy, you should not.”

He sprang into his saddle, and, to Lucy Brake’s astonishment, turned his horse’s head in the direction from which he had come.

“I will find my way to the farm by another route,” he said. “It will be better I should not see Kitty yet. You will meet her coming along this road, and she will be surprised to find you instead of her old sweetheart. God speed you, and good day.”

Lucy could almost fancy, looking up at his grave face, that there were tears swimming in his eyes; but that was hardly possible in a young man of so firm a character, and with so light a trouble, after all, to bear. And, before she was certain, he had ridden away at full speed, and left her to carry out her task, self-imposed, and in any fashion she might choose to adopt. She went on, wondering somewhat at Greg’s manner, and the way in which he had received the news; and presently Kitty Vanch in the distance, and in the bright sunshine, was seen upon the high road.

CHAPTER IX.

“THEY ARE VERY MUCH ALIKE.”

THEY were strange, almost unaccountable, feelings with which Lucy Brake watched the approach of Kitty Vanch. She did not think till then that matters foreign to herself and her grave thoughts of life could have so materially affected her. She was afraid her hand was trembling, for little Morice looked up into her face as if for an explanation of it, and she was sure her heart was beating very rapidly.

After all, what did this meeting portend? The explanation was not likely to be elaborate, and the story of Greg's love for her could be treated so lightly, that her listener might, by the very force of example, be brought to regard it lightly, too. And if she, Lucy Brake, were sentimental, of a surety, Kitty was not.

Kitty looked at life practically, and yet was so fond of Greg, that she was certain to forgive, perhaps laugh at, Greg's romance. And if it were romance, thought Lucy, as though some doubt of Master Dorward's *bonâ fides* crossed her mind, even at that instant.

How to begin, in what way to dash into a delicate subject, and conclude it satisfactorily before Farm Forlorn was reached, was not so clearly apparent to her as it had been, and now that the distance between her and Kitty was diminishing with every moment.

Kitty was walking briskly ; she had seen them, and increased her pace, just at the time when Lucy had wished she would saunter more slowly by the way, or wait for them to come up with her.

Was this task beyond her strength after all, thought Lucy ? She was a weak woman, seriously weak in argument, and self-possession ; and yet she expected to influence one whose strength of character was certainly greater than her own, and whom she did not wholly understand. She might set her against her, just as she was learning to be loved, and proud of the affection she had drawn towards

herself. She hoped not, for there was in her mind even the wild fancy that they were being drawn together for some reason, inexplicable and strange, and that the time was advancing when they would be of help to one another. All fancy this, but not to be set aside in the mind of one whose life wild fancies had influenced and marred, and who would escape, by fancy still, if possible, from the grim realities by which she was surrounded.

Kate Vanch had reached her now; little Morice had run on to meet her, and was jumping with delight at her side, and asking many questions; and Kate was bright with smiles.

“I did not think to find you on the Bleathorpe road,” said Kate; “I came a little way to meet Greg. You have seen him, Morice tells me?”

“Yes, I have seen him,” repeated Lucy, confused at being thus forestalled.

Kitty regarded her curiously, perhaps critically, and then said, briskly—

“Where has he gone?”

“I think he—he said he must take another road to the farm,” stammered Lucy; “and

that I was to keep you company instead. You do not mind?"

"You have arranged it very nicely between you," said Kitty laughing, "although I don't quite make it out yet; and I don't mind your company, Lucy—indeed, am very glad of it."

"Mumma," remarked little Morice at this juncture, and to her young mother's intense dismay, "was to tell oo all about it. Mitter Dorward said so."

"Oh!" ejaculated Lucy.

What awkward remarks children *will* make at times, and what powers of observation they possess!—observing without being observed, which is a great faculty, a wise man has assured us. And here little Morice had precipitated the crisis of explanation most woefully.

Kitty Vanch turned to Lucy.

"What's the matter?" she asked.

The dark eyes were full of inquiry—clear, bright, and unflinching; it looked as if the elder speaker might require consolation rather than this tall young woman at her side.

"Yes, I have a little to tell you, Kitty.

Nothing much—nothing very serious, for that matter,” said Lucy in reply; “and which you will see in its true light, and smile at, I dare say.”

“Very likely. I hope so,” was the quick answer back.

“And——”

“And as little children notice a great deal, and talk a great deal more of what they see and hear,” said Kitty, interrupting her, “might it not be as well for Morice to run on in advance of us?”

“Yes, I think it would,” replied Lucy now.

Morice received her instructions, and was disposed to disobey them, until pacified and bribed by the sole custody of her mother’s parasol; with which she tripped along some thirty yards ahead, looking behind her now and then to make quite sure that there was no deep plan to desert her on the part of her friends following.

“I suppose it is about Greg, all this,” remarked Kitty, when they were alone together on the road to Farm Forlorn; “so you can rely upon a patient listener.”

“It is very little to tell you, Kitty, after

all," Lucy began again; "and you are a sensible girl who will look upon it in the right light."

"Who looks upon it in the wrong?"

"Miss Brake," answered Lucy; "she has been having a long conversation with me to-day about you."

"About me and Greg together. Is not that it?"

"Yes."

"Poor mistress! she lets everything trouble her, even my engagement to Greg Dorward," said Kitty; "but then she is an invalid, and has much to brood upon. I have never known her really well, and that excuses everything."

"Yes," repeated Lucy, thinking it was rather strange that Kitty was having all the talk at present, and she was answering in monosyllables. Kitty saw this too, and added—

"But I have to listen to you, Mrs. Brake. I forgot."

"If you will call me Lucy, always, instead of Mrs. Brake, I shall be glad," said the widow. "It was understood a week ago that we were friends enough for that; and to be always

friends, and under every circumstance of life, from this time forth, you and I, I hope."

"I'm sure," replied Kitty; "that is," she added, with a sudden reserve, "I think I'm sure."

"You must not have a doubt of it, or a doubt of me," said Lucy very earnestly; "that would be to grieve me. I want you to believe implicitly in me, and what I tell you; otherwise I fail."

"Fail in what?" asked Kitty.

"Miss Brake said to-day, Kitty, that you would never be happy with Greg for your husband; that he was not deserving of you, and he did not love you," began Lucy, dashing desperately into the subject at last. "All this a great mistake of judgment on her part, but which she wished me to tell you, and which I promised I would."

"I thought it was Greg whom you promised," said Kitty, a little bewildered in her turn.

"I had to ask Greg's permission to speak of this at all!"

"You are very kind, Lucy. I do not know in your place whether I should have been so considerate as that, or thought of that. But,"

Kitty said, and as quick as lightning, "why Greg ?"

"Because I had promised Greg never to speak of this—to keep his secret, such as it was, to myself."

"Greg's secret too, then ?"

"Yes. A foolish thing altogether, based on nothing—on a silly fancy, even," said Lucy.

"On Greg's being in love with you ? That is it, I suppose," said Kitty, very quietly now. Perhaps too quietly, thought Lucy.

"Yes, that is it," was the reply ; "on Greg's fancying that he was—being only a boy, and boys always take romantic ideas into their heads concerning women older than themselves."

"You are not an old woman, Lucy," Kitty remarked. "I don't suppose two years make much difference between man and woman at any time, and with real love between them."

"But there was no love between us," said Lucy quickly in her turn ; "on the contrary, a little dislike on my part—a feeling of offence, perhaps of wounded pride, that he should think it possible I could forget my murdered Morris, who——"

"Never mind your Morris just now," said Kitty impatiently; "I have heard so much about him in my time. We can talk of him presently, Lucy, at the farm. Tell me of Greg—the one who is all to me, who was all in all to me when I was a little desolate wretch, with no father, mother, sister to keep me straight. Only the policeman at the corner of the Rents!"

"Well," continued Lucy, "there was a passing fancy for me in Greg's mind as he grew up. I was kind to him; I was interested, like my father and Mr. Woodhatch, in his facility for acquiring knowledge, in his perseverance and industry. But as for any love for him, I had none to give to anybody."

"Not even for John Woodhatch, who deserved it," muttered Kitty. "No," she added, "I don't suppose you would care for my Greg. That he should love you was very natural—and I have wondered before this why he did not. For you are a beautiful woman, Lucy Brake, though you do not want my word to tell you so."

Lucy blushed, and did not answer. She was not particularly vain of her good looks,

but she was conscious of her beauty, and possibly of its power.

“If he had told me so himself,” Kitty continued, “I could have forgiven him, for what was I to him after all? And what,” she added sadly, “could he remember of me, but a child’s shadow in a London street? It was my doubt always that he should keep me in his memory; it was only the dear master watching us, as God watches us, I think, who said, ‘I will bring these two strange lives together; I will end it like a story-book.’ Who thought we were worse even than we were,” she added, shivering, “and it was my one chance, and his duty, that we should become man and wife.”

“As you will do, loving each other very truly,” said Lucy.

“Yes, I love him very truly,” answered Kitty thoughtfully; “I have always loved him. I was the only one who understood him as a child; perhaps I am the only one who sees clearly now what he will become. When a boy whom everybody feared but me, he would share his last crust—the crust he had stolen—with Kitty Vanch; when we had been

driven out of doors together to steal, by Greg's father or mother, we would, if *unlucky*," she added scornfully, "console each other by hopes and fancies for the morrow, as we huddled together among the baskets in the market, or on the dungheaps in the stable yards. We were together, helping each other, that was enough. We had no other friends. And I would help him now, in everything and for everything, even if he hated me."

"Which he does not, you are sure."

"No, he likes me—a little!"

"I am sure he loves you as well as—"

"As I deserve," cried Kitty, with a short laugh. "Ah! I don't fancy there is much love in the matter, now you have told me he has thought of you. Of course," she added with a little sigh, "that cannot be."

"It can."

"He is afraid of Mr. Woodhatch, who has asked him to marry me."

"You must not look upon it in that light," said Lucy.

"I don't know in what light to look at it," answered Kitty irresolutely. "I want time to think it over, and see what is best. What

is best for Greg, I mean, not for me. *That* doesn't matter."

"What is best is that you should not think any more about it," said Lucy cheerfully. "The position is settled; you are going to be married, and the rest is the morbid fancies of a sick woman, who thinks too much of herself, and the doubts of a true-hearted girl," touching her arm, "who thinks too little. And that is never wise."

"I suppose not," answered Kitty; "but then," she added quaintly, "I have such a very little to be proud of. I should not think much of this—what is it, after all——"

"Ah! what is it?" said Lucy with alacrity.

"*If*," continued Kitty, "it was all over, had happened two years ago, and Greg was smiling at it now—or, at all events, not grieving. Well, one must consider this. I am not likely to make him in any way unhappy—and by marrying him, I might."

"No—no—surely not."

"Did he ever ask you straightforwardly to become his wife?" she asked.

"Yes—he asked me."

"When?"

Lucy Brake did not relish this questioning—more particularly this identical question, which certainly was a leading one, and of an awkward tendency. She was compelled to answer truthfully, although it was in her heart to deceive her, and for her good. But Kitty Vanch looked like a woman whom it would be difficult to deceive just then.

“A little while ago,” she said at last.

“How long ago?”

“I—I—can hardly remember.”

“Oh yes, you can. You will in a minute or two,” said the persistent Kitty.

Lucy hesitated again. She was not getting on very well—not so well as, in her naïve conceit, she had imagined that she was. This was a question worse than all the rest. What put it into Kitty’s head to ask it, of all troublesome questions in the world!

“Was it before I came to Skegs Shore, or afterwards?” said Kitty, as if to assist her fair companion’s memory.

“Well—afterwards,” confessed Lucy at last. “You had just arrived—he was unsettled and not his quiet self.”

“Had he seen me?”

“Oh no,” said Lucy with alacrity. “It was before he had seen you.”

“I am glad to hear that,” responded Kitty. “I dare say it was on the night I found him tramping along the sands—where we met again after five years of separation. After nine years, if I do not reckon seeing him at the railway station. That’s it.”

“To part as children, and to meet as man and woman resolving to begin life together, speaks well for faithfulness on both sides,” said Lucy. “The romance between was—but romance.”

“You are never likely to care for Greg?”

“Never.”

“He does not seem—quite good enough for you?”

Lucy looked askance at Kate, as though she could believe there was satire in this new inquiry; but the grave, sad face wore no mocking expression to check all sympathy towards her. Kitty had asked in simple faith, and was waiting patiently for a reply.

“I have not thought of that, at any time. It is not of a man’s past, a true woman thinks, but of his present life.”

"Thank you. That is John Woodhatch's teaching?"

"Yes."

"And your father's?"

"And my father's, assuredly."

"And under any circumstance," continued Kitty, "you would not marry Greg Dorward?"

"Not under any circumstance."

"I am worrying you with many questions," said Kitty, "but this is a turning-point in my life, and it is difficult to decide."

"Is there much to decide, after all? You are engaged to be married, the day has been fixed," said Lucy; "you——"

"I am thinking of Greg," said Kitty impatiently, "as I have told you already. Not of myself. And I will not stand in his light. Why should I?"

"You do not."

"He will answer that for himself," said Kitty quietly; "he is not likely to quarrel with me, when I tell him he can have his own way, and act as he thinks best. It is not a very serious matter, as you say."

"No."

"I suppose men are very much alike; but

then I don't know much about them," said Kitty irresolutely. "I have been brought up with Miss Brake of late years, and shut away from lovers. I can fancy most men being vain and weak and unfaithful, as they mix in the world and see many faces to tempt them."

"What an awful, miserable thought!" exclaimed Lucy at this. "One would hate most men were they as weak wretches as that."

"We should be more likely to forgive them," said Kitty smiling; "and after a good scolding. As I may forgive Greg for thinking you so much more to be preferred for his wife than Kitty Vanch. But," she added, "men are weaker than women; I am sure of that."

"My Morris was not weak," cried Lucy confidently.

"Yes he was—very," was the thoughtless answer.

"What!" cried Lucy, forgetting the motive which had brought them together that afternoon, and changing on the instant from the wise, kindly counsellor to the indignant

woman. "What did you say? What did you dare to say?"

Kitty Vanch turned pale at this sudden outburst, and then coloured.

"I am sorry if I have pained you. I had forgotten for a moment," she said.

"Forgotten what?"

"That you were his wife—and he had been very dear to you," replied Kitty. "I hope you will forgive my foolishness. I did not know what I was saying."

"Then Morris was not weak!" cried Lucy. "You were not thinking of him when you answered me?"

Kitty did not reply to this interrogatory; it was her turn to find questions vexatious and embarrassing.

"Were you thinking of him?" asked Lucy again.

"Yes," said Kitty; "it's no use my pretending I was not. I saw Morris Brake occasionally the year before he died. He came now and then to his sister's house, and I used to think he was very weak."

"In what way weak?" asked Lucy. "Tell me, please, Kitty, what you mean?"

“I cannot tell you any more, save that I thought him weak. Weak in his good opinion of himself, his handsome face, his manners, and very vain of his own judgment—little faults that Miss Brake said he inherited from his father,” answered Kitty with great rapidity of utterance.

“His father ran away from his children and wife to live with another woman. Have you heard that?” said Lucy.

“Yes, part of it,” said Kate. “Don’t weary me, Lucy, with fresh stories. Has it not struck you I have had enough of my own trouble to-day, without hearing of other people’s?”

“I will say no more. Only, Kitty, you frightened me,” said Lucy, with a shudder.

“You must not mind what I say.”

“No,” said Lucy very thoughtfully; “I will try not.”

They were close upon the farm, and Morice Brake ran on towards it, being tired of her own company, and conscious that even her mother did not care for it at present.

Presently she was at the farmhouse gate, holding John Woodhatch by one hand and

her grandfather by the other, swinging herself between them, and laughing merrily. Greg Dorward stood there also, having reached home quickly by another route. At the distant window sat Miss Brake, knitting busily, with Carlo watching her, as though he were taking a lesson in the art. At the door, under the creepers which were flourishing above the porch, stood Mrs. Chadderton, prim and neat in her black dress. And above all alike were the blue sky and God's sunshine. It was a fair picture; but what a host of thoughts at work beneath the placid masks of these strange folk about here! If they could have read each other's thoughts that afternoon, or the rustling green trees could have whispered what they were!

Kitty walked on a few paces in advance of Lucy. She had seen Greg already, and noticed that his face was pale, and wore an anxious look. He smiled faintly as she approached him, but his dark, deep-set eyes looked closely into hers, perhaps asking a question which before that group of friends he dared not shape into outspoken words.

"You are home before me?" she said,

smiling very faintly too. “Did you come by the other road?”

“Yes, Kitty,” he answered.

As she passed him she slipped her hand into his for a moment, and pressed it in earnest of good faith, of trust in him, of her own affection, and then went slowly into the house and upstairs to her own room.

CHAPTER X.

THE RESULT OF IT.

GREGORY DORWARD was not quite happy in his mind, although he possessed the art of concealing his emotions tolerably well. He had more upon that mind, too, than Lucy or Kitty imagined, and Miss Brake's first move in her campaign against him or Kitty—which was it?—had been successful in its uncomfortable way. Still, the ice was broken; Kate Vanch understood the position, and there was one secret the less. He hoped Lucy Brake had told the truth after her own fashion, and better than he could have done it; but there was a feeling at his heart now that he might have told it better, having love on Kitty's side to plead for him.

If he wanted it to plead for him—for we are not certain how Gregory Dorward regarded

the position, any more than Kitty was certain. Greg was not sure, either, he had escaped cross-examination by Lucy's proposition that she should undertake this delicate matter for him. He and Kitty must speak of this when they were alone together for the first time, and when Miss Brake was not watching them so narrowly. It was not likely they could go on side by side, as if nothing had happened since the happy, peaceful yesterday.

Later in the day, in the beginning of the evening, with the sky aglow with crimson, Kitty Vanch and Greg Dorward strolled across the flat, sandy land to the sea-shore where they had met first as man and woman. Greg had proposed going, and Kitty had acquiesced very readily, and there they were alone together, as they had wished and Greg had schemed for. If an explanation were to cause a crisis, it was better it should come at once, both thought now; for time was hastening on, and the present position had grown perplexing and false.

Greg would not be nervous over his statement. Lucy Brake had paved the way for him, when he had shrunk at first from telling Kitty

the whole story for himself. A few words might be necessary, nothing more; but he did not say them till the deep stretch of sea-sands was beneath their feet, and there was no living soul upon it but themselves.

“ You have been told a strange story to-day, Kitty,” said Greg at last, “ and you feel you hate me for it.”

“ Not at all,” answered Kitty, very calmly and yet sadly; “ it was what I thought must happen three years ago or more, when John Woodhatch spoke of my marrying you. If you had grown to be a gentleman almost, I could not fancy my being a lady to match; and I *could* fancy your choosing for yourself, and not thinking much of me. And it was Lucy Brake’s fault you did not.”

“ Yes; that is partly it, Kitty,” he confessed; “ I wish I could say it was not.”

“ As it is the truth I am glad to hear you say it,” she answered; “ we shall get on better without lies, Greg.”

“ Certainly,” he replied. “ And are you very much offended with me ? ”

“ I am not offended.”

“ Surprised ? ”

“To hear it all for the first time to-day—so late as it is—yes.”

“And sorry?”

“Very,” said Kitty, without a moment’s hesitation.

“At any rate,” said Greg, “there is not much to be sorry for. It is all ended, Kitty, and we shall be happy enough without Lucy Brake to bother us.”

“I am not quite sure of it,” answered Kitty; “it is not so easy to see the end of it.”

“She can never be anything to me,” said Greg; “and I am not one to fret for a woman who would not have me. It is all over.”

Kate Vanch looked at him, and said, in a strange, pitying tone—

“Poor Greg!”

“Why do you say, ‘Poor Greg’?” he asked.

“Because you love her still,” she answered; “because her beauty is a snare for you, and still bewilders you; because it would be heaven’s happiness for you to call her your wife, and because you never, never can.”

“I have said it is all over.”

“But you love her.”

“ I am not sure of that.”

“ Oh ! but I am. Sure, too, that you are sure, only you think it kind to spare my feelings ; as if I had any feelings worth considering, Greg,” she added with a little sigh.

“ We do not come to any fair understanding by useless talk like this,” he said presently. “ I have been a fool, and I own it. She was not fit to be my wife ; she would not have been a helpmate to me. And you are the very one to suit me in all respects, knowing me so well. And we shall be happy ; by God, I know we shall ! ”

He was excited, and gesticulated almost in dramatic fashion.

“ But you have no real love for me ? ”

“ Yes, I have.”

“ Ah ! no, Greg ; I know better than that,” said Kitty. “ You would marry me, but at any moment there might come to you unhappiness, or a new temptation ; and without me there will be freedom, and the power to make your own way. And so, Greg, I am about as likely to be your wife as Lucy Brake.”

“ Kitty ! ”

“This afternoon,” she continued, “I thought I could make up my mind to let things go on just the same ; that I should be able to make you comfortable and contented in the new home at Bleathorpe. But no ; it cannot be.”

“Why not ?” asked Greg.

“You might learn to hate me. Once tied to me for life, you might learn to see in me a bar to your advancement. You will be better without me altogether,” she replied.

“You cannot tell.”

“Yes, I think I can,” was the answer. “Why, I should only doubt you now, feel I was in the way, be always afraid of you.”

“Has it come to fear ?”

“Not as we are. But I—I don’t quite make you out, Greg, always. You are beyond me ; not in any way like the Greg Dorward I knew once.”

“Is not that something to be glad of, remembering what I was ?” he asked bitterly.

“Ay—yes, thank Heaven ! But I should like the boy’s love back again ; at least, the trust in me, the feeling I was of help to him, the old Greg Dorward, even in his rags,” she exclaimed.

"We may come to rags again, now that we defy John Woodhatch," said Greg gloomily.

"Then I will come to you," cried Kitty, "if you'll have me. To help you out of trouble, always Kitty Vanch; but to be miserable in your prosperity—why, never!"

"I haven't lost you, then," muttered Greg scornfully; "there is great hope for me!"

"Ah! you can say bitter things," said Kitty, "but I do not mind them."

"I feel bitterly," he answered. "I feel everything is crumbling to dust beneath my touch."

"You will be rich, you will be prosperous," said Kitty. "Mr. Woodhatch will not think any the worse of us for altering our minds."

"You do not know him as well as I do."

"I will take the blame upon myself," said Kitty.

"He will not believe you," Greg replied; "he will require full explanations of the reasons which have parted us."

"I will give them to him."

"If you tell him I have thought of Lucy Brake, it will be my ruin," said Greg. "You know he loves her. You have heard people

say he killed Morris Brake because of her.

“No one is likely to believe that now,” said Kitty; “and he will not be hard on me. I will tell him—which is the plain truth, Greg—that I have altered my mind, and feel I am not fit for you, or good enough.”

“Good enough!” he cried.

“Or clever enough, or well educated enough, to be your wife. That, despite your wish,” Kitty went on, “I will not have you, and don’t care for you. And I will not say a word of Lucy Brake.”

“And your mistress? That horrible woman,” he said, “hiding like a witch in the darkness, she will know all.”

“She knows it already.”

“And,” he said, “*you* can trust her not to tell the master? I would as soon trust Mrs. Chadderton.”

“I would trust them both in this.”

“Why?”

“They would spare him a care at any cost,” said Kitty; “and he will be satisfied if we tell him we shall be happier apart.”

“You do not know him,” said Greg again.

“ Oh, Greg, we shall see who knows him best in a little while ! ” she said ; “ and let us part friends, you and I, at least.”

“ Are we going to part for good ? ”

“ We part as lovers—if we have ever been lovers. Nothing more than that. To remain as brother and sister, always if you will,” she answered.

“ No,” he said slowly, “ let it be for good. You will go away with your mistress as soon as it is possible, and then the less we see of each other the better.”

She drew a little quick breath at this, then said—

“ Yes—I think so too.”

Greg Dorward stopped as if there was nothing more to be said, and Kitty Vanch understood the movement, and went on slowly towards Farm Forlorn alone. There *was* no more to say ; she had explained everything that was on her mind ; she had told Greg again what she had determined, and he had not urged her very warmly, very passionately, to reconsider her decision. He had spoken more of the result of the separation, and of how John Woodhatch would regard it, than of any

disappointment on his own part. Of what would be his prospects after this, not what would become of her who was owning her love for him still, letting him see he was first and foremost in her heart—he who betrayed no affection for her in return; only a poor, clumsy imitation of it which did not stir her, unless it was to anger.

Well, there was an end of it. Better that it was all concluded in this fashion, thought Kitty, than to make him miserable for life; to feel day by day increasing the horrible conviction that she was a clog upon him, a something between him and his progress. What would become of her presently, she did not know. Across the waste land of her life stretched the rugged uphill path with no light upon it yet, and she must pursue it to its close. There would be no one to care for her after this; and she did not want any one to care!

She went straight to her own little room, tired out with doubts. Miss Brake had given her permission, and guessed the object of her withdrawal.

“It is all working as I wish,” she whispered

to herself as Kitty went away. There had been no difficulty in noting how Kitty's brief love-story had ended. The face of the girl was calm enough, but it was the gravity of a fixed despair. Kitty Vanch had been so happy—so truly happy—only that bright morning ; having acted for the best, she was now like a child, shut out from happiness for ever. Greg would be all right presently—and that would be her solace presently too ; not yet awhile.

She sat and thought of this at the open window of her room, looking upward at the shimmering stars ; and hour after hour passed away, without much knowledge of time and how it stole along, recking not of her love-troubles. She heard the shutters of the farmhouse closing, the voices of men and women below calling "good night" to one another, and to John Woodhatch, who answered cheerily, not guessing yet that his last grand scheme had collapsed, and thinking all was fairly well at Skegs Shore. Footsteps echoed along the corridors without and died away, doors were closed and locked, and presently, when all was very still, her own door, which she had not

fastened, was tried and then opened, and Lucy Brake came stealthily into the room and laid her hand upon her shoulder.

“ It is all over between you and Greg,” she said, and in so stern a tone of voice that Kitty looked up in faint surprise.

“ Yes. Do not let us talk of him again to-night, please.”

“ I have not come to speak of him,” said Lucy.

“ Thank you for that.”

“ I have come to speak of my lost husband.”

“ Ah ! well,” said Kitty wearily, “ what of him again ? ”

“ Why did you not tell me the truth this afternoon, when we were so close upon it ? Where was your frankness—your good faith—of which they boast in these parts ? ”

“ Who do ? ”

“ Answer this, and tell me the truth in one word, if you can,” cried Lucy, without replying to her question ; “ one word will do it, and I will not believe it from her.”

“ From Miss Brake, do you mean ? ”

“ Yes.”

“ Cannot you spare me to-night ? ” urged

Kitty ; “ cannot you see my grief for the living is greater than yours should be for the dead ? ”

“ Ha ! you know what I am going to say , ” cried Lucy .

“ I think I do , ” Kitty responded .

“ Did my husband Morris , then , at any time , ” asked Lucy , in a voice that shook with its emotion , “ I mean a little while before his death—only a week or two , my God , and after we were married !—make love to you ? ”

“ Yes , ” answered Kitty Vanch .

CHAPTER XI.

THE TRUTH OF IT.

LUCY BRAKE dropped like a stone to the floor. Had Kitty shot her, the effect could not have been more complete. Prepared as she was for the avowal, the answer was nevertheless as hard for Lucy to resist as to accept.

She had brooded for so many years on the love and constancy of her young husband, of the hero that he was in her generous estimation of him, and never dreaming for an instant of the hero he was not.

When she came to herself she found her head resting on Kitty's breast, with Kitty's arms round her, and her tears upon her cheek.

"My poor Lucy! I did not think you would give way like this," said Kitty.

Lucy struggled from her embrace, rose to her feet, and sat in a chair away from her; and

Kitty stood with folded hands, sadly submissive to this new evidence of aversion. It was to be expected, perhaps ; there had been too lavish a profession of friendship for a beginning, and hers had been a terrible confession, or appeared so at first sight. Kitty moved slowly to the window and closed it, went to the door and locked it, and then resumed her position before the young widow, prepared to answer any questions which Lucy had the heart to put to her.

But Lucy Brake continued to regard her with a grave, fixed stare, like a woman wondering at her, and for ever perplexed.

“I am sorry you have heard this,” said Kitty at last ; “that such a miserable truth should have come to you to-night.”

“She told me ; not you,” replied Lucy, in a low tone. “You would have deceived me to the end of your life, had it been in your power.”

“I think I would,” answered Kitty ; “I think it would have been for the best. Morris Brake is dead ; what necessity was there to speak of his faults, or to shake your trust in his virtues ? It is all over and gone.”

“Yes, it is all gone,” repeated Lucy—“gone like a dream.”

“Why did Miss Brake tell you anything of this?”

“To crush me down—to make my dark world darker and more desolate,” said Lucy; “that is all.”

“No; hardly that,” answered Kitty. “She was thinking you had made an idol in your heart of Morris, and he was not worthy of such devotion. That he stood between you and all chance of happiness.”

“Why do you think so?”

“She has spoken of it very frequently,” replied Kitty. “‘If Lucy would think less of my dead brother,’ she has said, ‘she would love a better man some day.’ She——”

“I don’t want to hear what Miss Brake has said,” cried Lucy petulantly, “but what you have to tell me. You own he made love to you. In what way do you mean?”

“Is it worth while?” asked Kitty helplessly. “Is it any use?”

“Yes. Let me hear the whole truth; let me know my Morris as he was, rather than as my fancy made him. He is dead,” she added,

mournfully; "he was everything to me. I shall not love him the less."

"Then why——"

"He made love to you?—well, go on," cried Lucy impatiently.

"He pretended to love me, would be a better phrase," said Kitty, "for he did not care for me in any way, and I disliked him from the first."

"I can't believe it," said Lucy at once. To dislike Morris Brake was a complete impossibility, thought this young one-ideal woman..

"When he came to see his sister, he would pay me a great deal of attention. It was dull at Boston, he did not always agree with Miss Brake, and I was a little distraction to his dulness, probably nothing more at any time. I am not quite certain," continued Kitty, "that Miss Brake would have been sorry if I had learned to love her brother; she thought he was single, and a wild young fellow whom marriage might improve. Of his future she was afraid; he had as many faults as good traits of character, she used to say of him, and his impulses, without direction, might lead him on at any time to ruin. I thought he might have been in love with me a little. I

did not fancy it was all play-acting until I heard he was your husband."

"And you heard that?"

"After his death."

"Not before then—at Boston? Go on, please."

"There is no more to say. There is very little which you can care to hear. I knew I was not fit for him. I was always glad of a pretext to avoid him and his compliments. His one surprise, poor fellow, was that I was not flattered by his notice, or to be led away by it."

"To be led away!" repeated Lucy in a husky whisper.

"Yes. He would have led me away if he could," said Kitty; "he liked me a little, and I was only his sister's servant in his eyes. One ruined woman, more or less, would not have mattered to him, any more than it matters to many a scoundrel like him. Ah! forgive me," cried Kitty quickly; "I forgot for a moment he was your husband."

"You have a right to think the worst of him," murmured Lucy, "if this is true. If it is possible to be true."

“ If it will spare you any pang, pray think the worst of me,” said Kitty, “ and that all this is my poor invention. What can it matter?—what does it matter? ”

“ He is sleeping in his grave. He cannot answer any charge against him—he has had no time even to say, ‘ God forgive me,’ ” murmured Lucy. “ Yes, what does it matter now? ”

She sat and stared before her like one who had been struck by a heavy blow and was bewildered by it. The pained, perplexed look on the fair young face touched Kitty’s heart, and set her own troubles further back that night.

“ You will never care to speak to me any more,” said Kitty mournfully; “ and all this has been so much against my will that you should know. So I lose two friends in one night, and am more alone than ever.”

“ You have quarrelled with Greg? ” asked Lucy in a faint, far-away voice.

“ Not quarrelled with him. I have lost him.”

“ You have been too hasty. You are playing into the hands of that dreadful woman Hester Brake, as I have done to-night. Why does

she exult in human misery so much?" moaned Lucy.

"She acts for the best—for what she thinks is right," said Kitty; "and if the truth kills, it is still the truth with her."

"You feel she has injured you too?"

"I—I would rather not hear a word against her," answered Kitty.

"Strange the power to do mischief which she has," said Lucy, shuddering again; "she rests amongst us like a blight. How long will she live, I wonder," she added bitterly, "to do such cruel work?"

"Hush, hush!" said Kitty; "she has only stripped the bandage from our eyes so roughly that the truth has blinded us for a while. That is all. We shall see more clearly presently," she added with a sigh.

"You may," answered she; "I shall not."

"Yes, yes, Lucy, you will,—and if I may call you Lucy now," said Kitty, stealing towards her, bending over her, and putting her arms timidly around her neck; "and you will grow more content, more happy, with every day that follows this. This is no new trouble to you—only an old one which you have

chanced to hear of, and from which I would have spared you all my life."

" You would have deceived me ? "

" Yes—I would."

" And would have been glad to be deceived ? "

" About Greg ?—yes," answered Kitty, " I think I would ; but God knows ! I have been trying to piece it out, and have only failed. I had been so sure—so very sure—that his life belonged to me, and was to be trusted to me. But—you don't care to hear. I'm selfish to speak of it to-night."

" No, I—I cannot think of it," said Lucy, rising ; " I should be glad to get to my own room. I feel very weak."

" Lean upon my arm, and let me lead you."

" I—I am afraid of you," said Lucy faintly. " I don't know what other secrets you may have—what else you may tell me some day. Yours has been so dark a life ! "

" Yes, madam," said Kitty very humbly, " that is true."

" All is confusion with me, and nothing seems as it was this bright morning."

" Nothing is," came the slow answer back.

“I am a poor half-witted girl who has lost her way, but,” she said, “I may come back to it, with some one to love and to trust in—and with God’s help. To-night I am dreadfully alone, trusting no one in the world.”

“You have a father to love—you have John Woodhatch to love you, Greg to love you, little Morice to love you,” said Kitty. “Ah! Mrs. Brake, you are rich in affection, and have lost no friend. It is I who am alone.”

Lucy put her hand through Kitty’s arm.

“But it is you who are strong—who will know what to do. Why is it,” she asked, “that I am weaker than you—so much more of a child?”

“That may be all the better presently,” said Kitty.

“I do not see that.”

The two young women went out into the corridor, Lucy walking with difficulty, like a woman in her sleep, and Kitty guiding carefully her steps. Lucy’s room was only a few paces off, but it was very dark without, and some one seemed to rustle away in the distance, and be lost in it.

“Mrs. Chadderton, I suppose,” said Lucy,

after pausing for a moment; "she has been playing the spy as usual. Ah! well, what does it matter, as you said a little while ago?"

"Not much," responded Kitty.

At Lucy's door they paused.

"If I have stabbed you with my words to-night," said Kitty, "try and forget them presently. I would have spared you had you let me."

Lucy put her hand upon her shoulder, and kissed her softly.

"I thought I hated you an hour ago, but I don't," she said. "Good night."

Kitty returned her kiss and "good night," and walked back thoughtfully to her own room.

CHAPTER XII.

A LETTER FROM ABROAD.

PEACE remained in the ascendant at Farm Forlorn for several days after this, and each inmate in trouble and doubt kept the trouble and doubt in the background, and did not harass other folk with them. Still it was a false peace, which deceived no one; and there were many waiting—almost patiently!—for the storm which they thought must come soon to the homestead of John Woodhatch.

John Woodhatch, perhaps, was the least suspicious of the little community gathered at Skegs Shore, although he had been roughly awakened to the fact that one great scheme of his life was, so far as it had gone, an utter failure, after all. One more mistake of his, despite his generous plotting for other people's welfare, and his planning for the common

good. The collapse of one more scheme, the greatest and the best ; and it had all ended as Parson Larcom had prophesied, which was the aggravating part of it.

“Not that it *is* the end of it, Alec,” he said ; “or I will own it *is* the end. You are only right up to present date, and life is full of change.”

“And women too,” added Mr. Larcom ; “they never are of one mind vary long.”

“I don’t know that,” answered Woodhatch. “The few I have known I used to think were fixed to one idea.”

“Miss Brake excepted,” said Mr. Larcom with a laugh.

“Oh, she’s mad !” was the short reply, as John Woodhatch tramped away over his fields. He hardly meant what he said,—although Miss Brake aggravated him at times by her innumerable suspicions, by her calm demeanour as well as by her fits of fretfulness. He was discontented with the whole sex at present ; there was no clinging to one idea now about them. He should be a woman-hater in good time, he thought ; the fickleness of women vexed him, their sudden change of

opinion and intention kept him restless ; and the mystery encircling their motives, when he asked for motives, would have made him as insane as they were, if he had not sought refuge from everything and everybody in sheer hard work, and bargains at the markets.

It was Kitty who had given the last turn to his thoughts. The girl from whom he had least expected a disappointment or rebuff had suddenly confronted him with the announcement that she was not going to marry Greg Dorward. She had faced him a few days ago with this astounding statement, looking so earnestly and straightforwardly into his inquiring face, that he had not the heart to be very angry until after she had left him. As he informed Mr. Larcom afterwards, he had stood like a fool, and had scarcely a word to say in reply ; although a five years' scheme had been shivered and splintered before him as though it had been glass.

He had been speaking of Tolland's farm to her—indeed, had paid her the compliment one morning of offering to drive her to it on a visit of inspection ; and she had seized the opportunity of apprising him that the

engagement was at an end between her and Greg Dorward.

“It is as well to tell you I shall never marry him, sir,” was the statement made; “and I have persuaded him to agree to the breaking of our engagement. Seeing him again, and judging for myself that I am no more fit for him than he is for me, why, I feel sure it is the best to part whilst we are friends.”

All this had been spoken very rapidly, in considerable haste to get to the conclusion of a story which embarrassed her seriously in its relation.

“This is Greg’s fault, not yours,” came the quick answer back, and in the listener’s first surprise.

“No, sir; it is mine.”

“On your honour?”

“On my honour, Mr. Woodhatch,” was the reply. “Greg is sorry, I think. Greg would marry me to-morrow if I would change my mind again.”

“What the devil have you been quarrelling about?” John Woodhatch had exclaimed; and this was the one little burst of anger he

had indulged in during the interview. "Do you think I asked you here to wrangle with him?"

"I have not quarrelled with him; he has not been angry in any way with me. It is all my fault—if there is any fault in judging what is best for one's self," said Kitty.

"You are only a child. How do you know what is best?"

"I think—I hope I do," answered Kitty.

"And are my wishes to go for nothing?" he asked; "and at the last, like this, when I have found a farm for him, and stocked it, and made a home for you both? And both of you dumb till it was all arranged, and I had spent my money."

"Ah! there, I am truly sorry. But Greg and I have just met as man and woman; we had been so long strangers to each other. You had only talked of him to me for all these five long years, and I did not know him for myself. There was the mistake of it all, Mr. Woodhatch," continued Kitty; "and when it came to the reality, when I could only see in a marriage with Greg much unhappiness, and more mistakes, I made up my mind not to become his wife."

“Very well,” said John Woodhatch gloomily.

“You do not wish me to be unhappy, dear master, I am sure. You would not care to saddle Greg with a soured and discontented woman.”

“Like her I was idiot enough to put you with, and whose manners you have copied,” he said bluntly.

“Oh, Mr. Woodhatch!”

“There, do as you like, Kitty,” he said, touching her shoulder with his broad hand by way of consolation, or apology; “it is your life, not mine, and I don’t want to make it unhappy.”

“Thank you.”

“Still I am sorry for Greg. He has not been treated well in this matter, so far as I can see. But,” he added quaintly, as he walked away, “hanged if I see an inch ahead at present.”

He had gone away, thinking Greg might offer some clearer explanation of the facts; but Greg’s frankness had only more completely mystified and disheartened him.

“I am more sorry than you are, sir,” was Greg’s explanation of the case. “I am sure

she would have made the best of wives. It is her self-depreciation which renders her morbid and nervous. She is unfit for me, she says, and nothing at present will convince her to the contrary."

"At present? Then you think it likely she will change her mind?"

"Yes, sir. We have not quarrelled."

"So she tells me."

"And I don't give up the hope that all will soon come round," Greg added.

"You are not one to give up," remarked John Woodhatch. "Every day you remind me more of what I was at your age—full of courage and trust, and not to be cowed in the face of opposition. I should be very sorry if you were not able to conquer this silly fit of fastidiousness in Kitty Vanch. It is so right a thing you two should marry."

"Yes, it is," Greg responded.

"I suppose that fidgety Miss Brake has been advising her," he muttered. "I wish she had never come here."

"She is full of fancies, poor woman," answered Greg, as moodily as his master.

Then they had separated; and matters, as

we have already intimated, had gone on peacefully, to all outward appearance, until this date; that is, some two weeks since John Woodhatch had filled his house with guests, and, as it appeared now, to his own discomfiture. All would be right in time, he hoped; but the present was not very encouraging, although he could take comfort in it, and satisfaction from it, Lucy Brake being one of his guests, and one who it was a deep, silent pleasure to know was close at hand, and once more a part of his strange home. That her face was very full of sad thoughts, even of vague doubts, only increased his old interest in her—his wish to be of service to her for the remainder of his days. And if the wish were futile, as he knew it was, still she was by his side at Farm Forlorn, and did not speak of going away.

Meanwhile Hester Brake remained very impassive, and to all outward seeming took no satisfaction to herself at the result of her last revelations. The thin, worn face remained in shadow still, and the eyes had the same far-away look which they had always had. Kitty was as attentive as ever, but the conscious-

ness that the mistress's words had helped to separate her from Greg seemed to show itself in Kitty's manner, try how she would to appear the same. It was for the best, it had been done for her good; but for ever after this Hester Brake would be associated with unhappiness, with having worked much ill.

"Better to hate me than marry a man who never cared for you," she said one day, suddenly, to Kitty.

"I don't hate you, Miss Hester," was the reply.

"Do you love me any the less?"

"No, no. You were right enough in guessing Greg did not care for me; and it was right I should know. You gave me my chance," answered Kitty.

"No, I did not."

Kitty looked surprised.

"You would never have married him, even had you forgiven his loving Lucy Brake," said Hester. "It was not to be."

"I forgave his love for her at once," answered Lucy quickly. "I keep away from him—for ever, perhaps—because I cannot be of help to him."

“So that is it,” muttered Hester; “and you are as weak a fool as the rest of us.”

Kitty did not know what Miss Brake meant by this half-soliloquy, and did not press her for an explanation. She stole away the instant afterwards, and Miss Brake, staring before her into the garden, was not aware she had gone. Lucy replaced her in a few more minutes, but she did not look towards her, and the young widow passed through the room with no salutation to her sister-in-law. Lucy was less of a heroine than Kitty Vanch, perhaps—at all events possessed less of that heroic quality which consists in forgiving those who have dispelled our conceits, and toppled over the idols which those conceits had set up. In a fit of petulance, of angry recrimination, as it seemed to Lucy, Hester had drawn the true portrait of Morris Brake, and Lucy had not been grateful for the portraiture, and had even told Hester that she lied. Hence the reference to Kitty Vanch, and all the stern, bare truths of these latter days—the clear, cold cruel daylight wherein no fancies lived.

“You and my Lucy don’t appear to be quite as big friends as ye ought to be, conseedering

the reelationship," said Alec Larcom to her one morning, when she was reading a letter which had just reached her from abroad.

"No. She does not like me," commented Miss Brake, without looking up, "and I am tired of trying to make her."

"Ye've had more wards, I suppose?"

"Hasn't she told you?"

"No. She never did tell me more than she could posseebly help," was the dry reply. "Ye see, I'm a kind of creature that don't encoorage confeedence."

"No; you are too hard," said Hester, still perusing her foreign epistle. "If there had been more gentleness in your nature, and less presumption, you would have been a better father to her."

"Marcy on us, woman, what next will ye say?" exclaimed Mr. Larcom.

"She never had a mother. And girls brought up without mothers have a harder battle than the rest, let fathers be what they may," she said, looking up from her letter for the first time.

"Ay, there's soomthing in that," answered Mr. Larcom, "although ye have an un-

coomfortable way of explaining matters, Hester."

"And money will not comfort her a great deal, I presume—as it might you, Mr. Larcom," she added.

"I have a wholesome raspect for money," confessed the Methodist, "knowing the good it may do."

"To yourself?"

"To most folk, praperly applied," he added.

"Will *that* console Lucy, do you think, for all the wretched past?"

Hester Brake held the letter she had been reading to Mr. Larcom, who took it and adjusted his glasses carefully on his nose.

"It's in Freench," he said with disgust, "and ye know I can't read such ootlandish rubbeesh."

"It says that the estate is all settled, and the money which my bad father made abroad—Heaven knows by what means—is at the sole disposal of his heirs. They are myself and little Morice—who represents my dead brother, I suppose. I don't know French law, and it is too late to learn."

"Ye can take some theengs vary coolly,

Hester Brake," observed Mr. Larcom, returning the letter. "To think ye should have been reading good news like that with so meeserable a face, and talking to me of my presoomption all the while!"

"It is not good news to me. It comes too late, even if it were. I would rather have one true friend than all this money."

"How mooch money is it, altogether?" asked Mr. Larcom, with increasing interest in the subject.

"Some forty thousand pounds."

"Lard save us all!" ejaculated the listener.

END OF VOL. II.



